

*Confessions
of a*

DIME A DANCE QUEEN

A STRIP OF
TICKETS
WAS HER
PASSPORT TO
PASSION!

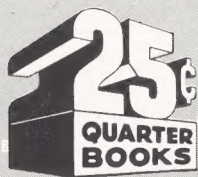
by *Doug Dupperault*

Author of *PASSIONATE PICKUP*

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Dim lights, blaring music, bodies pressed tightly together and provocative gestures. This was Donna's setting. For an ambitious charmer, it was much too tame—until she met Fred. He handed her a one way ticket to passion and with him she soared to untold heights of ecstasy. Trouble entered their lives and amid the intrigues of the dance hall, Donna came to know that all was not as Fred had told her. Love, she soon found, moved out when money moved in.

CONFESSIONS OF A DIME-A-DANCE QUEEN

by **DOUG DUPERRAULT**

Author of
PASSIONATE PICK-UP



The cover illustration is an original
painting, especially created for
CONFESSIONS OF A-DIME-A-DANCE QUEEN

This novel is complete and unabridged

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CONFESSIONS OF A
DIME-A-DANCE QUEEN

All the names and characters described in this book are fictitious, and have no reference to any living person.

CHAPTER ONE

THE young man braked the heavy car as the traffic light turned against him. He brushed the hair out of his eyes, swearing softly. When the light changed to green, he shot the car forward, swinging left off Third Avenue, down a street on the East Forties. His thin hands caressed the wheel nervously, stroking, babying it, almost as a woman. He stopped before one of the better-looking apartment buildings, locked the car, and ran to the doorway, ringing a buzzer insistently. He brushed back his dark hair again as he waited, his thin face betraying impatience.

When the answering buzz came, he opened the door swiftly, ran up two flights of stairs, paused momentarily before one of the two doors on that floor, then thrust the door open, not knocking.

The girl looked up from the stretching exercise she was practicing, smiled quickly at the man.

"Hi, Tony." She went to the mantle that topped a fake fireplace at one side of the room, retrieved her comb and brush, and carried them to the opposite side, flopped on a couch. "Ever think of knocking?" she asked, grinning slyly, brushing her dark blonde hair industriously.

"Not very often." Tony laughed a short, mirthless laugh. "Where are your butts?"

The girl gestured to the bedroom in back of her, still combing her tresses. She threw her body into each stroke, and the man watched the gyrations a moment before going after the cigarettes.

"Where, Donna?" his voice asked from the bedroom.

"On the dresser, under the Kleenex."

"Okay, I got 'em." Tony brought the pack into the small living-

room, flopped on the couch beside the girl, offering her the pack.

"Not right now," she answered, still brushing.

"Got a job yet?" Tony seemed to be expecting a negative answer.

"No."

"You know why I came."

"Oh Gosh, Tony. Not again." Donna stopped brushing her hair for the first time, looked Tony squarely in the face. "Why do we have to go through that again?"

"Look, Donna. You're not workin', right?"

She nodded, uneagerly.

"Well, so this is a chance for you to work. It isn't as bad as you think. Do you think I'd let a sister of mine do something that wouldn't be good for her? Huh?"

"No, Tony, I don't, but it's just that, well, if I'm workin' there, I can't very well get a stage job, can I?" She started brushing her hair again, this time the strokes slow, leisurely.

"You can still look for a stage job in the daytime, if you want to waste your time. But at least, you'd be makin' dough this way."

"Yeah." She wasn't enthusiastic.

"Look, Donna, I — well, I can't tell ya now *why*, but there's a reason, a damn good reason why I want ya to work there, honest. You'll be a help to me if you will."

"An' you can't tell me?"

"Not yet."

Donna eased herself off the couch, her skirt riding up on her legs as she rose. She walked to the window, looked anglingly at the 'El' where she could see it jamming its ugly way down the gullet of the city.

"What kind of a place would it be, Tony?"

"The best." He jumped from the couch, crossed to her side, his arm draped lightly about her shoulder. "The best."

"I don't know," she said shortly, jerking away from the dingy scene at the window. "Dancehalls never appealed to me, even the good ones."

"You never even been in one."

"I know, but — I've read about them."

"Aw, hell, baby, they're not like that at all, not the good ones. Believe me."

"I want to, Tony. Gosh knows, I could use the dough." She searched his eyes anxiously, watched as he went to an ashtray by the couch and doused the cigarette.

"Will ya do it then?" Tony held her arms, waiting for her answer.

"Okay."

"Swell. An' as soon as I can, I'll tell ya why it's important." His face lightened visibly at her acquiescence. "Look, you pick yourself up a dress. Here's some dough."

"Oh, I don't need that, Tony."

"Take it. Get black — either satin or somethin' like it. Make sure it's tight, an' if it's got a slit up the knee, that's all the better."

She nodded slowly, picturing to herself how she would look in a tightly-fitting sexy dress.

"An' low-cut." He was anxious to be going, now. "Tomorrow sometime, you go get a license, huh? Down to 156 Greenwich Street. I'll call for ya here about five tomorrow, an' then I'll take ya to the hall. Okay, honey?"

"Sure." She smiled slightly, still envisaging herself in the gown.

"Don't worry, Donna. It'll be okay." He brushed his thin lips against her cheek, went to the door. "Tomorrow," he reminded, and left.

Donna lit a cigarette, drawing heavily on it as she walked to the bedroom, took a robe from her closet and laid it across the bed. Then she started undressing. She threw her dress on the bed, sat down to take off her stockings. Her body was slight, supple, a dancer's body, full in the right places.

When she was naked, she ran her hands down her length, then up, thought how the dress would reveal her like this, almost as though she were naked. The nearest thing to it. Then, throwing the robe about her, she crossed the living-room, turned into the bathroom just before the kitchen.

"This is goin' to be good." She reached up, turned on the shower.

Greenwich Street was a frowsy street in a frowsy part of town. Donna stepped quickly along the block in the afternoon sun, looking in uninterested distaste at the people and buildings that she saw.

Soon she came to the right place. So *this is it*, she thought. The Bureau of Licenses. The shabby building surprised her somewhat. An arrow pointed up an alley in guidance, and Donna followed its direction. There was a sign to the effect that the alley was not to be used as a thoroughfare, and anyone doing so would be prosecuted. Two men further along who were using it for just that caught her eye, and she laughed. Somethin' else that's bein' put over on the cops. Midway in the alley, a courtyard extended to her left, and a door in the building where it jarred into view awaited her.

"Guess that's the place. If I go any further, I'll be using this as a thoroughfare." She giggled, and placed her hand over her shapely mouth to cover it.

Another man walked through the alley, eyeing her, standing there. She walked to the door, stood inside, looking about. The dinginess of the alley carried over into the building, she noticed as she started climbing the stairs that another arrow indicated. The stairs were grubby, grimy, the walls filthy.

Looking down a long corridor, she could see the sign outside the door. The office for cabaret and dancehall licenses. Past the cop standing in the archway, down the hall, left. Donna walked into the corral facing the desks and files, the men standing about on the other side of the barrier. She stood, waiting.

Eventually, one of the men turned to her.

"Yeah?" His shaggy eyebrows shadowed his eyes, and his shirt was sweat-stained.

"I want to get a dancehall license."

"To operate one, or work in one?" His mouth curled sarcastically.

"Work." She didn't feel like swapping funny sayings with this guy.

"You got a police record?" he asked, eyeing her body.

"No."

"Ever work in a speak?"

"No."

"Clip joint?"

"No."

"Ever have a previous license?"

"No."

"Fill this out." He handed her a two-page questionnaire, turned away. Donna took the sheets of paper to the long board that lined two sides of the corral, filled them out quickly. The questions were similar to those the shaggy eyebrows had asked her. After she had finished it, and had her picture taken, the man brought her back to be fingerprinted.

"That hand first," indicating the proper one. He held her hand a moment before separating the thumb for printing.

"Why does a nice girl like you want to work in a dancehall?"

"To make money, why else?"

"There's other ways." He finished with the hand, reached for the other.

"I don't like other ways."

"You'll get in with some bad company in those places."

"I'm goin' to work in the best of 'em."

The man mumbled something, finished the printing, then filled out a temporary card for her.

"This'll cost ya a buck. Hope you ain't gonna be sorry."

"I won't be."

"Well," he laughed, "if ya ever get into any trouble, we'll be along to rescue ya," laughing again.

"I'm sure," she said as sarcastically as possible, taking her card and leaving.

"Ready?" Tony stuck his head in the door, called to her.

"In a minute. Come in and sit," her voice called from the bedroom.

"I'll make a sandwich."

"Okay." Donna repacked the dress she had bought on the way home from the police station, placing it carefully in the box. Then, suddenly inspired, she peeled off all her clothes except her girdle

and stockings, slipped into the black satin sheath. Her every line and contour was revealed to the eye. Her round bosom was only partly concealed by the deep-cut neckline, and her proud breasts puffed and swelled at their constriction. She walked toward the kitchen, her thighs and hips moved languidly, the slit in the side extending almost to the top of her stocking on the right side. Tony was bending over the sink, slicing a tomato, and didn't see her until she had draped herself sexily against the door-frame, and cleared her throat obviously. A low growl of appreciation escaped his throat as he saw her.

"Boy, I wish you weren't my sister." His eyes roamed her body hungrily, then he grinned a sickly grin. "Wow, what bait."

"You like, huh?" Donna bubbled happily at his approval.

"Sure do. You'll get *all* the tickets with that thing."

"Hope so. I'll change an' be right with ya." Donna slinked her way back to the bedroom, again packed the dress, and put on her clothes.

Tony appeared in the doorway, half of the sandwich jammed into his small mouth.

"Look, sis, I got somethin' to tell ya."

"Yeah?" Donna made her face in the mirror, glancing her eyes at him.

"There's been a sort of change in plans."

"Meaning?" She painted her lipstick with a brush, accentuating the sensuousness of her lips.

"Meaning where you're going to work."

"Oh?"

"I—I *wanted* to put ya in one of the bigger places, sis, but somethin's come up, an' it'll be better if ya work in one of the others for awhile." Tony jammed the rest of the sandwich into his eager mouth and watched her.

"What's come up?" Donna stopped with half of her mouth made up, turned to him. "Can you tell me, Tony?"

"Not yet, honey. Soon, but not yet. It's important, to me. Very."

"You know I'll do anything I can to help you, Tony."

"Thanks, Donna. You ready?"

"Uh huh."

There are two hundred and seventy-five dancehalls in the city of New York. Of this number, two are given a class 'A' rating, nine of the rest a class 'B' rating, and the other two hundred and sixty-four are relegated to class 'C'. It was one of these that Tony stopped before, shutting off the ignition and turning to his sister. Her eyes were absorbing the view that greeted them. The front of the entrance was surmounted by a semi-circular neon sign that said *Dancing*. There were pictures plastering the outside of the entrance, and the inner walls of the hallway, before one reached the door. All the pictures were of girls, girls that presumably worked upstairs in the second floor dancehall. Pasted across some of the photos were legends inscribed on cardboard banners.

60 Girls 60

Girls Wanted.

Open 2 P.M.-4 A.M.

Orchestra Nightly.

"Donna?"

"Yeah?" She turned her gaze from the entrance, looked at her brother.

"I've got a favor to ask."

"Sure."

"I'd rather no one knew that we're — ah— related, huh? It would kinda foul up — what's goin' on."

"All right, if you want it that way."

"Yeah, it'll be a lot better. Everyone here only knows me as Tony, so you can use Lewis okay. Just don't let 'em know you're my sister. Okay?"

"Sure. I'm dying to know what you're doing, Tony. I just hope I can help."

"You can. For the time being, just get used to the place, get to know everybody. There'll be more later."

"Okay. Shall we go?" she said grandly, offering her arm.

He locked the car, followed her to the entrance. The neon in the sign gave them both a yellowishness of complexion as they stood briefly beneath it; then Tony opened the door, and Donna entered the building. Inside the door, it was dark, the hallway wide and short. Almost immediately, a long, steep flight of stairs faced her. About forty steps, she thought, figuring quickly. Then she started the long climb, Tony holding her arm, helping her.

"Take it all in stride, kid," he placated as they reached the top. Now that the stairs had been negotiated, they could see the cashier's window facing them across the landing. An old man was perched on a stool inside, selling someone in the hall a strip of tickets. The loud music blasted in their ears without the subtlety that distance had lent to it when they had been downstairs. The door to the hall was directly beside them, and Donna could see the operation of the cashier plainly. Before going in, the men paid the admission price outside, then entered the door to the hall, and went to another window in the cashier's booth to buy their tickets for the so-called dancing.

Tony stopped at the booth, tapped on the glass window to attract the old man's attention.

"Hey, Pop."

Pop turned at the call, fixing his rheumy eyes upon the two. His hands trembled slightly as he shifted his cashier's chair.

"This is the girl, Pop."

"Okay." Pop's gaze caressed Donna's body, his old head nodding slightly, as if in agreement to an unasked question. "Come on around. We'll go into the office."

"Look, Pop, I got to run. You take care of her, will ya?"

"Yeah, okay."

"Her name's Lewis, Donna Lewis." Tony held her arm for a moment, looking into her eyes. "Good luck, baby. I'll see ya tomorrow."

"You got to go, Tony?" Her face was worried, apprehensive.

"Yeah, Pop'll take care of you. So long now." He started down the stairs.

"So long." Donna watched his slim, retreating body, aching for him to stay and help her through the first few minutes of the ordeal.

"This way." Donna turned to see Pop standing inside the dance-hall proper, holding the door for her, waiting. A woman had taken his place at the cashier's window.

Donna entered the hall.

At first, she couldn't see much, the sudden transition from light to dark being too much for her eyes. Then, as she stood inside the door, she could make out the interior of the place. Basically, it was just a large room. At the right end, there was a bandstand, unoccupied at the moment. Facing it, at the extreme other end of the hall, was the bar, gaudy, flashily lit, a study of mirrored color. Between the bandstand and the bar was the dancefloor, surrounded by a railing two or three feet high. On the perimeter of this barricade were the tables and booths for 'sitting out' purposes. The only lighting was provided by multi-colored spotlights, suspended from the ceiling, or jutting up from the floor. These were dim, and rather than illuminating the place made it seem even mistier and dimmer. A huge glass chandelier hung over the center of the dance floor, reflecting all the light in cheap lustre.

Donna followed Pop past the ticket window, down the length of the dance floor, across a small open space, in the center of which was a circular leather seat, reserved for the hostesses, and into his office at the left of the bar. The bartender, cleaning glasses in preparation for a busy night, glanced at her disinterestedly as she passed. In the small, dingy office, Pop sat at his desk, indicated for her to sit on the cot that was the only other furnishing in the room.

The walls were strewn with cut-out pictures from detective magazines, photos of the girls that were, or had been, working there, as well as several drawings of the nude female body.

"Got your card?"

Donna searched through her purse, found the police card, and handed it to him.

"That your dress?" Indicating the suitcase that Donna had carried in with her.

"Yes."

"Okay. Tony says you're new to this; you ain't worked in a hall before."

"That's right." She turned her eyes from the wishful stare of the old man.

"Tony's a good boy. You'll be treated right here. You know the rules?"

"No."

"Well, there ain't many. But the law says we're supposed to do this and do that, and you got to know what they don't like in case they ever come here. We can spot 'em when they come, an' we signal ya, see, if you're doing anything you're not supposed to be? They don't 'low no lood dancing, ya know, rubbing bellies and stuff. So don't do that if they's a cop around."

Donna tossed her head nervously, wondering whether to look at the nude pictures, or at Pop and his X-ray eyes.

"In other words, when the cop's aren't here, anything's okay, but if they come take it easy. No improper clothes, no manhandling. All the rules are posted outside, 'case you forget. Strip a tickets costs a buck. That's for eight tickets, see? You get fifty per cent. When you're through for the night, figger up how many tickets ya got, write it on a slip of paper, and put your name on it, and hand it in to the cashier when ya leave. If the customer wants to sit out awhile, it's three bucks for a half hour, 'n you get half a that too." He stopped, his eyes fixed on her bosom.

"Is that all?"

"Just about." He got up, walked over to her, taking her hand. He patted it gently, staring at her. "You'll do all right. You're a lovely girl."

Donna withdrew her hand as gently as she could, stood up. She was slightly taller than the old man, although she wasn't a big girl, and now she looked down at him, waiting for the next step in the indoctrination.

"You'd better get dressed," he told her. "Business'll pick up pretty soon." He led the way out of the office, walking to the other side of

the bar where there was a room marked "Ladies," stopping long enough to introduce her to the bartender, Phil.

"Even though you don't get a cut on the drinks a guy buys," Pop cautioned, "it's a good idea to get him to drink a lot." Donna nodded that she understood, followed him to the door of the ladies' room. Pop didn't knock, but walked directly in, surprising the girls in various states of undress. They didn't squeal or scream however, as another collection of women might have, but just went on about their business, few of them deigning to even look coldly at the old man.

A fat bustling woman, the matron, waddled up when they came in. Her black uniform needed a starching and a cleaning badly.

"This is Donna," Pop told her. "Miss Emily is here to help the girls," he added, turning to Donna, bobbing his head, and leaving, his nervous tongue flicking his lips.

Donna kept Miss Emily waiting while she surveyed the dressing room, noticed that the girls were paying her no attention, just continuing with their dressing or their makeup, swearing as they struggled with a girdle. The room was small and dingy, crowded with women on one side, sitting in chairs facing a long mirror, with clothes racks on the other. The toilet was at the further end, and when it flushed, the pipes in the walls clanked and rushed noisily. Miss Emily showed Donna an empty chair, helped her off with her coat. Still, no one had paid the slightest bit of attention to her. Donna surveyed the women, trying to find some hint of friendliness. There was one young girl putting on makeup, a girl who looked as though she should still be in high school. Her face was pert and cute, her dark hair glossy. Beside her, an older woman was struggling into a dress. Donna was surprised to see that the dress covered the woman's breasts entirely. And the woman's hair was mousy, tightly curled. Donna wondered what appeal this one would have for the men.

"Move it over, honey." Donna stepped out of the woman's way, but instead of going by, the woman stopped, looking at her. "You new, honey?"

Donna nodded.

"What's your name, honey?"

"Donna. What's yours?" Surprised as the woman threw back her head and laughed heartily, her sloppy breasts shaking with her laughing. She was wearing only the thinnest of underwear, and these garments were dirty and tattered.

"My name, honey? Well, nuts, I'm called a lot of things, so why don't you jest call me honey, will ya, honey?"

The room shook with laughter of the women, although Donna couldn't see what was so funny about the full-blown woman.

"Jest honey, honey," she repeated as she slammed the door of the toilet.

The women were back tending to their various chores as Donna turned back to the room. No one was looking at her. Miss Emily waddled over.

"Better get dressed, honey. The men start coming pretty soon."

Donna nodded, afraid to undress. Her underthings were much better and nicer than any she could see, and she worried that she would be mistaken for a 'nice' girl, and consequently have no chance of getting friendly with the women. But she had to start, so she slipped quickly out of her clothes. Now, as she stood almost naked, the women looked at her for the first time, appraising her, trying to decide if this girl's body would get more tickets than theirs. Whatever they decided, it wasn't apparent to Donna, for their faces were masks of disinterest. Donna unpacked the black dress, slipped into it, as the women started filing from the room, going out to face the customers, and maybe meet money, and so have a good night. The young girl waited until all the others had left. Then, making sure that Donna wasn't watching, she opened a shoe box that was under her chair, and took out a pair of falsies, slipping them rapidly into her dress, her body ripening with her furtiveness. Then she went to join the others.

Donna finished dressing, applied some makeup to her face; this isn't so bad, she told herself. You just dance with a guy, and you make money. Dance close, of course. But if all the rest of 'em can do it, I guess I can. She pushed the dress down further off her creamy breasts, exposing the fullness of them, turned to the matron. Miss Emily nodded.

"You'll do fine. Now get out there an' make money."

"I'll try."

"You won't have any trouble."

The music, blaring loud and crass from the public address system, was like a slap in the face to Donna as she closed the door of the dressing room, looked in amazement at the change that had transformed the hall during the short time she had been dressing. It was a bit after eight o'clock in the evening, and the night's business was starting. There were several dozen men in the hall now, most of them at the bar, or standing around the railing, watching the few couples that were dancing.

Donna looked again at the dancers, staring. The couples weren't dancing, in the usual interpretation of the word. The woman and the man would stand in one spot, for the most part, their bodies glued closely together, their hips undulating slowly. Then, as she watched, one of the girls, a young thing with brilliantly dyed blonde hair, moved away from her partner, then slammed her hips against his, her thighs and buttocks gyrating madly. The man's hands clasped her tightly, his face a mask of emotion. Donna's gaze went to the bystanders. The men were leaning forward hungrily, enjoying this sight to the fullest extent. Donna turned from the scene in temporary disgust, not because she hadn't expected this, but because the realization produced an unhealthy feeling in her. She walked to the hostesses' bench, sat beside the young girl who now sat proudly, preening her miraculous breasts.

Donna couldn't take her eyes from the dance floor, the weaving pulsating, sensuous bodies. The hardened faces of the girls impressed themselves on her brain, and she noticed with shock that the women were evidencing no passion or, at the very least, interest, in what they were doing. They accepted it as a job, a business, for the most part, and they went about it in that way.

The young girl turned to her, studying her.

"You're new, aren't you?"

"Yes." Donna answered, glad for someone to talk to.

"Don't let all this throw ya. ou'll get used to it." She smiled.

"Thanks. It's sort of a surprise."

The girl shrugged her pretty shoulders. "It's work. My name's Ruth."

"Mine's Donna."

"Hi ya. Mind if I give ya a couple of tips?"

"Uh uh; I wish you would."

"Well, Donna, in the first place try not to be disgusted by what goes on. It's nothing, really. But more important, don't pay any attention to those phonies that are just lookin'. They don't have dough, or they'd be dancing. You'll just waste your time with them, and Pop don't like it." Donna nodded, memorizing the instructions. "When ya sit out with a guy, you make more money. So, it's a good idea to let 'im feel around over the barrier, if ya want to make good dough. They have that damn thing at the tables so that kind of stuff can't happen, but it don't stop it." She referred to a partitioning barrier that was at all the tables to partially separate the men and women when they sat out for awhile. It wasn't too high, but it satisfied the law, Donna thought.

Ruth pointed to the dance floor. "Just so you'll know who's who, that one's Ann — " she said, pointing at the woman who had affixed 'honey' to her every utterance — "and we call her baby — she ain't no baby, but she never told us no other name, so — " Ruth shrugged her shoulders.

A sailor tottered over to the girls' bench, extended a strip of tickets at Donna.

"Dance, honey?"

Donna stood, taking the tickets, followed the sailor to the dance floor as the six piece band filed slowly to the stand. The records kept right on playing. There were no breaks, continuous music being the rule. It would be band, records, band, records, all night.

The sailor, his white hat still cocked on his head, his bleary young eyes watching her lewdly, his hair that showed black and curly, grasped Donna tightly around the waist, pulling her close to him, moving his lithe body rhythmically. He pressed his face against hers, inflicting on her nostrils the smell of whiskey and soured beer.

"What's your name, honey?"

"Donna, sailor, What's yours?"

"Just call me Jimmy, baby. You got a nice shape, ya know?" His hands caressed her, his eyes fastened on her low dress. He pulled her closer still, standing still, pulling her body to him.

"Move it around a little, Donna, come on."

Donna complied slightly, feeling a warmth in her loins even with the slight distaste the act engendered. She did it again, and Jimmy moaned ecstatically. Donna, looking over his shoulder, could see that some of the watchers had shifted their gaze to her, and suddenly she felt embarrassed, and pulled her body away from the sailor.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, sailor." But he could tell from the look in her eyes that something was definitely amiss.

"You new, kid." She nodded imperceptibly. "Go sit awhile then. Keep the tickets, kid." He left her, and she muttered a small sigh of relief for the temporary respite.

Ruth was dancing, but Ann and another girl were sitting on the bench.

"You ain't met Peggy, have ya?" Ann asked, and Donna shook her head. "Well, this is her." Donna nodded, smiled at the girl. She was Donna's age, but the hard lines about her mouth and eyes made her appear older. Her hair was soft and fluffy, but somewhat unkempt. The dress she wore was red satin, and it set off nicely her green eyes, full mouth. She smiled back at Donna, and her eyes, a beautiful green shade, were listless and dull. Probably tired, Donna thought as she sat.

A man approached the hostesses, looking for all the world like the typical small-town business man on a big-city spree.

He indicated Donna with a crook of his little finger, taking her roughly by the arm as he walked her to the dance floor. *This man, at least*, thought Donna, *isn't drunk*. When they were on the floor, he placed his chubby hands on her shoulders, waiting for her to move into him. She did, timidly, still not used to the idea at all, and he smiled benignly.

"What's your name, honey?"

"Donna. What's yours?" Even the second time, she could see that the routine would be engraved on her mind as a song on a record, and the man would always be the needle that would play it.

"Well," laughing with false gusto, the business-laugh, "my *real* name's Wilfred, but" laughing again, "my friend's call me Willie."

"I'll call you Willie then."

He held her tight, moving against her savagely.

"Mmmmm." His puffy eyes were getting glassy now, with his passion. "What do you do when you get out of work?"

"Ohhh —"

"How about meeting me? I'll make it worth your while."

"Gee, I can't." *What a pig, thinking I'd meet him anywhere. He's old enough to be my father.*

"Aw, come on." His hand tried to pull her dress from her heaving loveliness.

"Stop it, mister."

"Why not, some of the other girls are doing it."

Donna eyed him in disbelief, but allowed herself to look at the others. Sure enough, two or three of the girls were dancing that way, their dresses down farther than necessary.

"What do ya say?" the man pressed, urging her.

"No." Donna was afraid she was going to be sick. "Here, take your tickets."

"Wait a minute honey. Where are you going?"

"That's none of your damn business." The man stared in surprise and hurt, looking like one does when he is insulted and is powerless to do anything about it.

Donna ran to the dressing room, found it empty but for Miss Emily.

"What's the matter, Donna honey?"

Donna slammed into a chair, the tears fighting for release.

"I think I'm going to be sick." She held her head in her hands, the blonde hair flowing around her wrists.

"It gets ya like that sometimes, 'specially when you're new to it. Why don't ya go home, honey?"

"Would it be all right?" looking up at her with miserable eyes.

"It sure would. Go on now. You get dressed and beat it. It won't be as bad the next time."

Donna thanked her, dressed hurriedly. No one saw her leave the hall, except a few of the stags who tried to paw her as she went by on the way out. She half ran, half walked all the way home to her apartment on the east side. The dance hall was a twenty minute walk west of her place, and now she made it in ten, ran up the stairs, and, once inside, flung herself on the bed without bothering to take off her coat.

The tears came then.

CHAPTER TWO

DONNA wasn't primarily what people call a "nice" girl, if the termination has any meaning. Donna hadn't been protected by a mother's loving arms all her life, and for that very reason, she knew her way around, she knew the score and wasn't one to be fooled or shocked easily. But despite her knowledge of worldly things, she had been shocked to the core by her first night as a dance hostess. She had built around herself an emotional immunity that was better than armor. It was almost as if she left Donna home when she went to work, and took another entity for the night's degradation.

After a week, she looked on things at the hall objectively, to the best of her ability. Only last night she had had an inkling of this new self, when a man had told her that he could only afford one strip of tickets, but asked her nevertheless to give him a good show for it. Donna had cocked her head at the man — he had been young — raised an eyebrow at him, and said —

"Mister, if you can't pay your way, it's too bad. You don't get somethin' here for nothin'."

But after all, she thought bitterly, why should I go on like this? Gosh knows, I'm not enjoying it. And I don't see how the hell I'm

helping Tony, even if he says I am. I don't see it. She threw the cigarette she had been smoking into the gutter, turned into the entrance of the hall. The late afternoon sun slanted into her eyes from the West, temporarily, and she cursed its brilliance as she climbed the stairs. A few of the girls had to be there during the afternoon, just in case some hard-up male with a few bucks to spend should decide that the afternoon was the best time to let loose his loneliness and frustration in bought company. Donna paused at the top of the stairs a moment, regaining her wind, then pushed through the door to the hall and went to the dressing room.

Peggy was the only one there. She still wore the red satin dress that had been her costume for the last week. It was shoved back to her hips, her feet were on the dressing table, and she took long, slow drags on a cigarette that hung from her lips. Donna noticed one thing. Her eyes, which before had been dull and listless, now shone, and the pupils, in their delightful greenness were small and bright. Peggy waved without speaking, motioned to a chair.

"Much business?"

Peggy shook her head no, watched herself in the mirror as she inhaled another languid puff on the cigarette.

"You the only one here?"

Peggy nodded briefly. Donna shrugged to herself, took off her dress and slip and bra, and got ready for work. The black satin had been augmented by another dress, this one of heavy crepe that was even tighter about her delicious body than the other had been, although Donna had thought such an occurrence impossible. She slipped into it now, smoothing it in place—standing this way and that in the light, eliminating wrinkles and creases, until her body was a shimmering, sensuous blackness. She went to the door and told Peggy —

"I'll go out front to the bench."

Peggy gave no indication of hearing, and Donna went out. Her eyes took in the empty hall, the bartender polishing his glasses, old Pop leaning against the cashier's cage, waiting for some business. She smiled at them both, then slinked to the hostesses bench, sitting carefully.

The door opened, and Tony came in, looked around, and seeing her, smiled. She smiled back at him, glad to see him. It had been four days now. He stopped with Pop at the door, handed him a small package, then walked over to her.

"Dance, girlie?"

She laughed with him. "Is that all you want to do, Mister?"

"Not by a long shot." His face didn't laugh when he said it, although his mouth did. "Who's in the dressing room?"

"Peggy. No one's here yet. Not even Miss Emily."

"I'll be back, Blondie. I gotta see Peg."

"I'm not a blonde."

He turned back to her, the oil on his dark hair glistening in the light. "Then what the hell are you?"

"A light brunette."

"Bull, sister, an' I do mean sister." He walked away laughing, returning in a moment.

"How's it going, Sis?"

"I'd like to talk to ya about that, Tony, if you've got the time?" Her face puckered slightly, frowning.

"Sure, I always got time for you. An' wipe those lines outa ya face. Makes you look older than me. Want a beer?"

"Oh, you big spender, you."

"What do ya think, I'm gonna *buy* it?" He joined her at a table with the glasses and two bottles of perspiring beer. The table was dark and private, but then, all the tables in the hall were. It was conducive to big spending.

"What's on your mind, Blondie?"

"My name's not Blondie."

"All right. Blondie, Sis, Girlie, Hey You. Whatever you want to be called, what's on your mind?" Donna could see he was in a good mood, and it made her hesitate before saying what she had made up her mind had to be said.

"I don't like it here, Tony." She waited apprehensively for what he would say.

"You don't like it?" He was finding it hard to believe.

"No, Tony." Donna tilted her glass, poured the cold beer as she talked. "It's not — It's not what I thought it was going to be." Donna searched for a proper way of expressing herself, couldn't find it. "It's not what I thought," she repeated dismally, her unhappiness creeping up to choke her and clog her throat.

"What the hell did ya expect, kid? Paradise?" His lips curled in a sneer. "I didn't think you was any chicken, when I ast ya to help me. Gosh!"

"Aw look, Tony, if it's helpin' you, then I'll stay right here. I—well I just don't see how it's helpin' ya, and I'm sick to the stomach sometimes when I get home at what happens here." She drank deeply of her beer, refilled the glass in the silence that followed. She glanced quickly at her brother, saw that he was thinking. She sipped her beer now, watching him. She lit a cigarette from a pack he had tossed on the table.

"Listen kid. I — I wasn't going to tell ya this. No one's supposed to know. It's a — well, a private matter, 'n it ain't for the public, ya know?" She nodded dutifully, wondered what he was driving at. "But, if you aren't happy here, well, I guess it's only right that I should give ya a reason why I want you here. Huh?" His fingers worked nervously at the edge of the table as he talked.

"That's right, Tony. If you could just tell me *why*. Honest, it's awful here. Although," she admitted quietly, "it isn't as bad lately as it was at first."

"I'll tell ya, Sis. But you gotta understand, it's just between you and me. You got that? You and me only. That's all."

"I got it."

"Well, look." Tony's eyes took in the hall quickly, saw no one. "You remember when I was sent up for carrying a gun?"

"How could I forget?" Her mouth set itself in a bitter line as she remembered the disgrace his arrest had caused her and their good family name.

"Forget it now. It's all in the past."

"You call a year the 'past?'"

"Yeah, I do. Now forget it."

"You're the one who mentioned it."

Tony's face angered as her arguments prevented him from reaching his point. But he said nothing.

"Anyway, Sis," he said, spacing the words, making them heavy so she would listen to what he was saying. "When I got out, I was out early, for one reason. I — I promised the cops that if I ever got the chance, I'd help 'em out. Yeah, that's right, help 'em. So a little while ago, it ain't important just when, but it ain't been long, I got called in. They told me 'bout this dancehall. They think somethin' fishy's goin' on here. They aren't sure what, but they got ideas. They think there's pimps sending guys up here to make dates for later on. But that isn't what bothers them most. They — " he lowered his voice, looked about the room again — "they think someone's running dope through here. They want to find out for sure, see? So I put you in here, so's you could help me help them. See?"

"I don't know." His words had been glib enough, but they had been in a manner that left doubts in her mind. It was as though his sentences were rocks at the top of a cliff, and everytime he spoke, he would push a rock off the cliff, and it would come tumbling down. When he spoke again, he would push another rock.

"You don't know. What do y'mean, you don't know?"

"I mean I don't know, Tony," she told him. "I'm not sure I know what you want me to do."

"Look. If someone's running dope here, they gotta be using someone for the drop, right?"

"What's a drop?"

"That's the person, or persons they leave the dope with, see?"

"All right."

"So I've got to try to find out who these people are, and find some way of catchin' them with the stuff. That's where you come in. When you find out who's passing the stuff, let me know, see? That's all. And if any guys come around here asking funny questions, ya know, do you know anything about this or that, you tell 'em nothing, just let me know. They'll be the ringleaders checking up. You got all that?"

Her head swam with the instructions, with the importance of what

her brother was doing to help the police. She was proud of him.

"I think so, Tony."

"I'll run through it again for ya. Want another beer?"

"Tony, you said a mouthful," she agreed eagerly.

"You mean a glassful, don't ya?" He laughed softly as he went to get the beer.

When Tony left, Donna trailed back to the dressing room. Ann and another of the girls, her name was Barbara, had come on duty, and, business still being nil, there was no sense in her being out there on the floor. Besides, she wanted to think, wanted to divide the things that Tony had told her, divide them so that they could be reassembled in a more orderly fashion.

Peggy, not smoking now, looked up when she came into the dressing room.

"No business yet?"

"No one at all's come in."

"Yeah, it's sad." She reached a shapely arm for a tissue, blew her nose loudly. "Can I talk to you kid?" She didn't look at Donna, keeping her worried face straight ahead in the mirror.

"Talk? Sure, but — "

"It ain't easy, Donna. But — Gosh, I gotta talk to somebody." She turned to her now, biting her lower lip nervously, her fingers crumpling the tissue over and over.

"Go ahead," Donna told her, matter-of-factly, sitting at the mirror, fixing her makeup. Peggy didn't speak, and Donna looked at her. "I'm listening."

Peggy watched Donna finish making up her mouth, then pull up her dress to better cover her firm breasts now that she wasn't on the floor.

"Please look at me, Donna. I — this is hard for me." She cast her eyes to the floor, and when she looked up again, Donna was sitting quietly, waiting for her.

"Go ahead, Peggy. What is it?" There was a kindness in her voice that hadn't been in evidence the past few days.

"I — I think I'm in trouble!" Tears formed in her eyes.

"You're not married?" Donna knew the answer before she asked it.

"No." One tear rolled down Peggy's soft cheek, and that tear was followed by another, then more. A sob escaped her throat, and her head fell into her hands as she was convulsed with her sobbing. "Oh, I'm scared, I'm scared. What can I do?"

"Will — will the guy marry you?"

"I don't know which one it was!" She cried harder now, shaking her head slowly from one side to the other. "Please, Donna, don't — don't hate me. I need a friend now so bad, 'n — well, I can't tell Ann, or the others, you know. You're the only one. I — I'm not a bad girl, Donna, please believe me. I couldn't help myself. I — I had to do it. I didn't want to, honest. I just had to. I couldn't tell 'em no."

Donna reached over, patted the girl's shoulder slightly, then realizing that it wouldn't help, knelt beside her, her arms tightly about Peggy's sob-wracked body. She tightened her hold, pressed her face into the girl's flesh. "Please don't cry, Peg. Something will happen that'll make it all right. Really it will, just you wait." She stood beside the girl, pulled her tear-stained face against her generous breasts. "There, there, baby. Shhhh now, shhhh."

After a few minutes, Peggy became quiet. She wiped her eyes carefully, looked up at the pretty girl standing beside her.

"You do believe me, don't ya, Donna honey? I — I'm not like that. You do believe me?" Her whole being pleaded for Donna's affirmative answer.

"Of course I do, Peg. Now you get ready. It's almost time for the 'boys' to come."

"All right. Thanks, Donna." Suddenly she grabbed Ruth's box of falsies, flung them mightily to the floor. "I want to keep on working. I can't afford not to. What'll I do?" Her voice was at an hysterical pitch.

"Peggy!" She waited until she had the girl's attention.

"Listen, Peggy. That won't help you at all. Now jus' take it easy. It'll all be all right." Peggy quieted down, slumped forlornly in her chair.

"It *sounds* good, anyway."

"It *will* be good."

The vocalist, finished with the lyric, walked to the side of the stage to wait for his next number. The band took up the melody, then dropped to a background as the tenor sax improvised. But Donna wasn't watching or listening. No one in the dancehall was more than vaguely conscious of the band, the tune or anything else that was incongruous to fleshy contacts. Donna pressed hard against her partner for the briefest of moments, then withdrew slightly from the man. He tried to grab her closer to himself again, but the music had stopped and his strip of tickets was exhausted.

"I'll get some more and be right back," he told her, shaking his long hair out of his eyes, his lips trembling with the passion that was seething beneath the surface of his body.

"All right, fella." Then she remembered his name, and called — "All right, Harry."

She leaned against the railing that ran all around the dance floor, having little gates to let the couples in and out.

He's not such a bad Joe, she thought. And he's buying a lot of tickets, so I might's well be nice to him. Gosh, looking about, even knowing what I'm supposed to find out for Tony, I can't see any sign of anything wrong here. Nobody's giving anybody any dope that I can see. She laughed quietly. I probably wouldn't know it even if I saw it. But I'll keep lookin' anyway, and maybe something'll happen.

Harry came back, holding a long strip of tickets. Donna immediately preceded him onto the floor, turned with her arms ready.

"Aw, honey, let's wait a minute. This dance is almost over." It was true. The band was playing the last sixteen bars of the melody.

"What are ya, a cheapskate. C'mon." She grabbed his arm, led him through a few steps before the number was finally through. "Your ticket, please?"

His face dropped. It wasn't a handsome face, and it was even less so at that moment; "Aw, fer —"

"Ticket please."

"Here." He thrust the ticket at her, scowling.

"Aw now, Harry, cheer up." She moved close to him as the next number started, ran her fingers through his long hair. "You don't want

somethin' for nothin', now, do ya? You're not *that* kind of a guy!"

"Naw, but nuts — "

"Shhh, just dance." Her hips lunged against his, and a slight moan escaped his lips. "Why Harry, aren't you *nice*." She did it again, and his face colored. He was in his middle-thirties, but Donna guessed him to be inexperienced. She decided she would have a bit of fun with him, and pulled the bodice of her dress down further than it was. His eyes stared in fascination at the lovely sight that was beneath them.

"Can ya — I mean, pull it all the way down?"

"Why, Harry, what a nasty thing to say. Ticket please." Another number began immediately. Her eyes flashed at his embarrassment, and she laughed lightly.

"Don't you enjoy that, Harry?"

"S—Sure I do," he stammered shyly. "It's just that — just that — "

"I know just what you mean, honey," she smiled, wriggling against him, enjoying it now that she, rather than the man, was the aggressor. It didn't seem bad this way, in fact, it was rather nice. When the man pushed and pawed her, Donna was moved by a feeling of revulsion. Now, with the positions reversed, it was fun for the first time. She was enjoying herself.

"Donna?"

She looked at him, expectant.

"Will you — I mean, will you — " Harry stopped, unable to say it.

"Will I what?"

"Go home with me tonight?"

Donna pushed herself away from him, the smile gone from her face. "I should say not."

"What do you mean?" Harry was incredulous. Why, hadn't he read that all the girls in the hall could be had for twenty dollars? That's what that newspaper article had said.

"I'll pay you."

"Listen, pal, it ain't the money, understand. I oughta sock ya for even thinking that of me, but you don't act like you got any more brains than that. I just don't do it. An' if I did, it wouldn't be for dough. Ya

got that." She thought of Peggy, and what had happened to her for making a few easy dollars.

Harry was pouting, looking away at the other couples, ignoring her. "You mad?"

"I'm — I'm disappointed."

"Well, you ain't the first."

"Is that supposed to help?" he asked airily.

"Suit yourself."

"I will. I'll leave you, if you don't mind too much."

"It don't matter to me one way or the other, Harry." She eyed him rather disdainfully, trying to make him feel cheap.

"Then — goodbye." He turned away from her, started toward the checkroom, but turned back. "Tell me, do any of the girls here — what I mean is —"

Donna cut him off. "I know what you mean. Why don't you — what I mean is — why don't you — I mean — ask them, I mean." His face colored deeply at her mockery.

"Bitch."

"Thank you. At least you don't think I'm a bastard." She smirked after his retreating figure, then started to the bench where Peggy and Ann were sitting, waiting to get a call. But before she reached it, a hand tapped her on the shoulder, and she spun about to see a man of her brother's height, with sandy-hued red hair, his face drawn in hard, masculine lines, and a discharge button still displayed prominently, despite the fact that the war had been over for what seemed ages and ages.

"Will you dance, Miss?"

The courtesy surprised her, and she nodded gladly.

"Certainly." She took the strip of tickets that he handed her. "My name is Donna."

"You can call me Fred, Donna."

They moved smoothly on the floor, Fred holding her close, but not unbearably so. She was glad to note that he didn't seem to expect the usual routine of grinding, just being content to dance.

"You seem like a nice girl, Donna." His eyes smiled down at her kindly, with interest.

"I try to be, Fred."

"I'm a little surprised at that, here." He motioned shortly to the surroundings, the blatant music, the weaving couples. They were almost out of place, dancing naturally.

"Funny things happen." She rested her cool cheek against his, gratefully. She had almost forgotten what it was to dance like this, to dance for the sake of dancing, period. She smiled thankfully at the man. He smiled back.

"In a way now, I'm kind of sorry I can't spend more time here."

"Oh, are you leaving?" Donna was genuinely sorry to hear it.

"Afraid I'll have to. Tell me something."

"Yes?"

"Are you here every night?"

"Uh huh."

"Then if I come back, I'll get to dance with you again."

"Sure. I—I hope you do come back, Fred." Her eyes conveyed the truth of what she said.

"I will, Donna. Count on me." He smiled, held her tighter for a brief moment. "So long now."

"Bye Fred." She watched him leave sorrowfully. *Funny how one guy can be so nice*, she thought. *Please come back, Fred. Please.*

Donna walked dismally back to the bench, took her place with the girls. She waited for more business, thinking her own thoughts.

The night dragged on.

CHAPTER THREE

THE next few days passed swiftly for Donna. The following night Fred had returned, true to his word, and she had once again been pleased with his courteousness and politeness. It was a Saturday night, the deadest of all nights for the dancehalls, since the majority of

customers on that night were best called 'vultures,' and they emphasized their pseudonym by being loud, cheap, and over-anxious. The girls at the hall were never happy with Saturday nights for this very reason, and it was with pleasure that Donna welcomed Fred, his face beaming, his reddish hair loose and wavy. Once again he was everything that she could expect in the way of being pleasant and undemanding, and once she caught herself wishing he were more like the others, at least in the way he danced.

Sunday found him again at the hall. Before he came, Donna found herself pressing harder than ever against the other men, as if she wanted to become completely miserable before he came to rescue her from the lewdness that was general in the place.

Donna thought of him more and more during the day when she was home at her apartment, or out making the rounds, trying to procure a theatrical job. She remembered him as an oasis, a place to stop and rest, to recover from what had gone before. She anticipated his coming, and whenever he was later than usual, she found herself worrying. It bothered her too, that he hadn't asked to take her home, or take her out, in the time since he had first come to the hall. It was obvious that he liked her, but—she thought often that, perhaps, he wanted only company, but thrust the idea quickly from her mind, finding it objectionable and incongruous. Fred was completely a man, there was no doubt as to that.

He didn't come Tuesday or Wednesday, and Donna worried. What could be the matter? Maybe he's married and his wife found out about his trips to the hall. Maybe he decided he didn't like me after all. Maybe he found another girl somewhere. Maybe— The doubts would pursue her all through the night's work, living with her as she went from one customer to another, as the music played on and on, as she sat out with men, drinking diluted drinks, and telling them how nice they were, as she listened infrequently to Peggy's troubles. These sessions were infrequent only because they were not often alone. Every time they were however, Peggy would have more news for her.

"I went to the doc today."

"What did he say?"

"What do ya think?" Peggy dragged on a cigarette, cupping the end so that none of the smoke was wasted. Donna at first had wondered at this practice, but had become used to it.

"I see. What are you going to do, Peg?"

At this, Peggy laughed a cracked laugh. "What can I do? I can have it fixed, but that costs money, and I'd lose time here. Or I can have the baby, an' that'll take even more time. Ah' I'd have to go to work some place daytimes, so's I could be home nights with the kid. Great choice!"

"Isn't there—I mean, something you can do right now, before it gets too advanced, something you can do to stop it?"

"That kind of stuff is too dangerous," Peggy told her, understanding perfectly what she meant. "I ain't takin' any chance on my life, honey, believe me."

"I don't blame ya. Isn't there any guy that'd marry ya?"

"I wish there was. I wish there was someone who was interested in something except a one-night stand."

Donna had left her then. She had begun to feel the tears of pity welling in her throat and eyes, and crying wasn't going to help Peggy. *Only, why does she still keep taking guys home with her, even now? Maybe she can't help it after all.*

Thursday afternoon, Donna went shopping, but not for herself. It was Tony's twenty-fifth birthday, and although he hadn't been at the hall for several days, she knew she would see him today. He had a way of showing up whenever there were gifts in the air. In fact, it was the only time that he was dependable. She thought hard about what to get him. Maybe something that he could use in his work with the cops, she thought. But no, he probably has everything he needs there already. What then? Something for his car? But there too, he already had everything that was humanly conceivable. She settled finally on a pair of ties, pure silk, decorated with hand-painted female figures. *He'll like these*, she thought, laughing, *if I know Tony.*

When she went to work that evening, she took the ties with her in

the box that contained her dress. She had had it cleaned, the slit in the side elongated an inch. It was better now. It went above her knee, so that when she walked the men could see the flexing of her leg. Yes, it was much better now.

She entered the dressing room, waved to Ann and Peggy, nodded to Ruth who was standing in the center of the floor, naked, surveying her youthful body in the mirrors, pinching here and there, rubbing various parts vigorously, apparently trying to stimulate growth.

"Guess what, Donna?" She stopped rubbing.

"What?" Placing the box on the chair, starting to unbutton her dress.

"I'm in love." Her face shone with triumph.

"She's full of soup, but she won't listen to us," Ann put in. "Why don't ya wake up honey? Gosh, I know all about that stuff, honey."

"Tell me," Donna told the girl, slipping the dress over her head.

"He's something Latin, a sailor. I've been living with him for a week. Oh, he's wonderful. He had to leave today, his boat left. But he told me that as soon as he gets home, he's going to inherit a big rubber plantation from his uncle who just died. An —"

"This is the part that kills me," Ann interrupted, and was met with an icy stare from the girl.

"You're just jealous," Ruth accused.

"I'm not jealous," Ann snorted.

"Go ahead, tell her," Peggy said impatiently. The other girls in the room who were dressing were paying them no attention.

"As soon as he gets his affairs straightened out," Ruth continued, "he's going to send for me, an' I'm going down there, an' we'll be married, an' I'll be able to live the rest of my life down there, getting tan, an' taking care of 'im, an' never have to work again as long as I live. He promised me."

Donna looked at the lustre of the girl's eyes, the wistfulness of her expression, and knew that it wasn't in the province to say that the story sounded like something made up to facilitate love matters.

"That's wonderful, Ruthie," she told her, trying to make it sound genuine. "I think that's swell."

There!" Ruth turned to the others defiantly. "See, you're just jealous, that's all." She strode in naked defiance to the toilet, closed the door triumphantly.

Donna turned to the others, shrugged her shoulders.

"What else could I say?"

"Honey, I was hopin' you weren't dumb enough to believe it, I really was, honey."

"Let's not kid her though," Peggy said earnestly. "She'll find out soon enough."

"Okay, honey," Ann agreed, getting up and walking out, flapping her dress for ventilation.

Donna took off her brassiere, laid it on the table, then massaged her body vigorously with the palms of her hands. Mmmm, that feels good. Damn tight clothes anyway. She held up the dress, looking at it before putting it on. Then she took the ties, in the long thin box in which they were wrapped, and put them carefully on top of her box of tissues. After retouching her makeup, she went out to the bench, taking her place with the others, waiting to be selected.

Donna's mouth set itself in a hard line as she bitterly thought of the senselessness of it all. Then her face lit as she saw Fred pushing his way through the gaping men outside the rail, coming directly toward her.

"Hi," she called gratefully when he was near.

"Hiya," he answered, smiling shyly. "You look good."

They were on the dance floor immediately, Donna's arms thankfully about his neck, her face nuzzled on his shoulder.

"I missed you," she told him frankly, without looking at him.

"Me too," he grinned. "Business kept me away for awhile, but I think it's all over. For the time being anyway."

"Good." She pressed close to him, feeling the rhythm of his strong body, moving in time with him, swaying in tempo with his mood.

"How you coming with your—shall we say—stage aspirations?"

"The same." She had told him of her wish to be a dancer in a legit show, had told him how hard it was breaking in, and he always asked her progress. "They tell me to come back in a week or so, an'



"Mind if I cut in, Mac?" the young man asked, and although Donna was glad to see him, she wasn't pleased with the way Tony had introduced himself.

they might have something. But it just means no. That's all it means."

"Too bad, baby. You deserve something better than this." He pulled her tightly to him. "Somethin' a lot better." Then a rough hand grabbed his shoulder, pulling him away from Donna. He turned to face a slim youth of his own height, a youth with dark greasy hair and a smirking face.

"Mind if I cut in, Mac?"

"Tony!" Donna was glad to see him, but wasn't pleased with the way he had introduced himself.

"Hi, baby. Get rid of the redheaded monkey an' we'll celebrate."

"Tony, please. This is a friend of mine."

"Yeah?" His insolent eyes looked Fred up and down. "You can do better, sugar."

"Listen, punk, I don—"

"Oh, for goodness sake, shut up. I'm sorry, Fred, I don't mean that."

"I hope not. Why don't ya let me take care of this punk, an' we'll—"

"This is my brother, Fred, Tony." She stopped suddenly, conscious that she had said what Tony had told her not to. She had introduced him as her brother. Even now, his dark eyes were glaring angrily at her.

"How do you do, Tony."

"Not so very well, thanks." His eyes still burned at her. "Thanks a lot, Donna."

"I'm sorry, Tony."

"You should be." They stood there, the three of them, in the center of the dancehall. The man and the girl stared at each other, as the redhaired man looked from one to the other curiously. Then the young man grinned.

"Let's forget all this. This is my birthday an' I want to celebrate. I want ya to meet a friend. You too, Fred." He walked away from them, toward a beautiful girl who was waiting at the bar. Donna hung behind with Fred, whispered.

"Please, Fred. If you like me at all, forget that he's my brother. And don't tell anyone here. Please?"

"Sure, Donna," he assured her. "I've forgotten already."

She pressed his arm as they went to meet the girl.

"Come on, come on," Tony hurried them. "This is Margaret, a very particular friend of mine." The girl bobbed her vivid blonde hair as he introduced them. She wore a dress that was cut low, and she had a lovely fur coat slung carelessly over her shoulders.

"Glad to meet you, I'm sure," Margaret said, seeming to be condescending to speak to them.

"Look," Tony said. "I got a coupla things to do. Wait here for me."

"Tony?"

"Yeah?"

"If you go in the dressing room, look on top of my tissues. One of the girls will tell ya where. There's something there for ya."

He walked quickly to her, hugged her tightly.

"Thanks, honey."

When he was gone, Margaret turned away from them, ordered another drink.

"That's a lovely coat," Donna told her, trying to be friendly.

"Yes, isn't it though?" She smiled indulgently, then looked distastefully at the surroundings before turning back to her drink.

"Is it real? I mean," Donna added hastily, "is it really—mink, I guess."

Margaret laughed a light, phony laugh.

"Oh, my dear, that's absolutely priceless. Of course it's real. And mink. Of course." She laughed again, looking from one to the other, laughing all the time. "And you know who gave it to me, my dears?"

"No, who?"

"Tony," she said, her chin jutting in the air. "Wasn't that nice of him, on his birthday to give *me* something. I thought it was just too precious."

"Y-yes, it's very nice," Donna stammered, her mind dazed. *Where did Tony get the money to buy mink coats?* She never had known exactly what he was doing at any time as long as she could remember. But surely whatever the police paid him, if anything, wouldn't amount to enough to buy a mink coat. She recovered from her shock to hear Fred and the girl talking.

"You're lucky to know a fellow like that, who can buy you such things," Fred told her.

"Oh, I suppose so," Margaret answered off-handedly. "He is sweet, I'll admit." She ordered another round of drinks. "I do wish he'd hurry back. I can't say that I'm overly fond of this place." She turned to Donna. "And you *work* here! Tsk, Tsk. I don't see how you can stand it. But then, maybe you're used to such things."

Donna wished she could tell the girl that Tony was her brother, but knew that she couldn't, had to go on letting her think whatever she did. *Probably that I'm an old cast-off mistress, or something like that.*

"Hardly. But some of us have to work," Donna countered slyly.

"I know. But then, this sort of—ah—work, must be awfully, ah, relaxing, mmm?"

"Yes and no. You'd find that working on your feet isn't as easy as some other ways."

The two women stared at each other in open hatred. Fred was racking his brain, trying to think of something to say or do that would break the tension. Then Tony returned.

"All business taken care of. Look, Donna, I—well, thanks, for the stuff, ya know, but I can't take 'em with me right now. You know, it would look kinda silly. You just keep 'em, huh, an' sometime when I'm not busy I'll take 'em. Okay?"

"Sure Tony. Anything you say." She looked with hurt eyes at her brother.

Tony and the girl were leaving. Donna called goodbye, tried to smile happily as she said "happy birthday" but couldn't. Tony was changing. He didn't seem to care as much for her as he had before she began working here. Of course, his indifference could seemingly be laid to the fact that he didn't want anyone to be conscious of any relationship between them. But she didn't think that was the reason at all.

Fred tugged her arm.

"When you're through dreaming, we'll dance."

"Sorry, I was thinking." She followed him back to the floor, as

though in a dream, the people, the music having no form to her. They served only as the background of her thoughts. She smoothed herself against Fred, her mind still off on a tract of its own.

"Hey."

"What?"

"What is right. What are you thinking? If it's any of my business."

"Can I talk to you?"

"Sure. You know that, Donna."

"I'm—I'm worried about that coat."

"Why?"

"Because it must have cost a lot of money, an' I don't know where my bro—where Tony would get that kind of money."

"What does he do?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Don't you know?" Fred was slightly incredulous.

"Sure I know. I just can't tell."

"What are you going to do when you get through tonight, hon?" His arm about her waist tightened.

"Go home an' worry about Tony, I guess."

"Do you live alone?" His arm around her waist dropped lower.

"Uh huh."

"Let me come with you. Please, Donna."

"No, Fred, I'm sorry."

"Why not? Why not, baby?"

Why not indeed, she thought. Why shouldn't I take him home with me an' have a little fun? He's a nice enough guy. But no. I couldn't. I just couldn't have him think I'm easy. If I make him wait, then he'll appreciate what he gets. It's like getting a new bicycle for Christmas. The longer you have to wait for it, the nicer and shinier it seems when you finally do get it. No, it wouldn't be right. After all, this is the first time he's asked me. I don't want him to think I'm too easy.

"I—I'm tired Fred. An' besides, what makes you think I'm that type of girl, anyway?" There was only one trouble with baiting a man this way. You couldn't carry it too far.

"I—I don't mean it that way, Donna." He paused, thinking care-

fully of what he was to say. "I—well, you can't have helped noticing it. I'm fond of you, Donna; I like you a lot. I thought you liked me, an'—well, I think that when two people like each other, that—that being together is a natural thing to follow. Oh, sure, a lot of people don't agree with me, but that's what I think. You don't have to agree. I just wanted you to know."

Donna didn't answer for a long time. They completed two dances before she spoke.

"You're right in one way, anyway, Fred. I do like you. Let me think over what you told me, will ya?" Her eyes pleaded with him not to become disinterested because of her refusal. "I—I'll let you know tomorrow night, if you'll be here."

"I'll be here. Look, Donna, don't think I'll stop seeing you if you say no. I'll want you to say yes sooner or later, of course, but there isn't that much rush." He held her gently.

"I've promised an answer tomorrow night. An' you'll get it then."

"Thanks, baby." He relinquished his last ticket. "Tomorrow then?" When she nodded, he passed his hand gently over part of her warm, exposed flesh. "Bye."

She watched him go, her eyes following him lovingly. Before he had reached the door, a man came up behind her, pinched her in a sensitive spot.

"Let's dance, girlie."

Donna took the tickets, allowed the man to caress her brusquely. She closed her eyes, thinking of Fred as the man's hands pawed her body trying to facilitate the escape of more flesh.

The next night Donna relaxed in Fred's arms, feeling the strength that coursed through them, transmitting itself to her through her thin dress. Her mind was made up, but she wasn't going to tell him her decision until four o'clock rolled around; and the hall was closed. And she had told him as much, so he knew better than to ask. Suddenly she remembered something, and looked at him.

"Guess what?"

"You will?" His face was anxious. Donna laughed.

"I told you, you won't know about that until closing."

"I think it's a cheap trick."

"Nevertheless." She tossed her head in a cocky reprimand.

"What then, am I supposed to guess?"

"I called my—Tony today. I asked him where he got the money for the coat."

"Yes." Fred's interest perked up at mention of the coat.

"He said it hadn't cost much. So I said, what do ya mean, a mink coat don't cost much? An' he says, what do ya mean, mink? So I said, ain't it mink? Margaret said it was, and he says, mink hell, that thing's rabbit. So ya see, I didn't have any reason to worry about where he got the dough, 'cause it didn't cost much."

Fred listened to her babble on about how the coat was rabbit after all, and told himself that something was odd. He had seen the coat, and if it wasn't mink, then he was no judge of furs. But if it would make her feel better to think the coat was rabbit he'd be the last person to tell her it wasn't. Let her have her thoughts. But that brother of hers, that Tony, he must be a smart cookie, all right. Yes-sir, mink doesn't grow on trees. He glanced at the clock on the wall, saw that the minute hand was creeping rapidly toward the upright position and the hour hand was on four; it would soon be closing, and he would have her answer. Donna too, saw that the night was almost over. She looked up at the man grinning slightly.

"Not long now."

"If you turn me down now, after all this buildup, I'll never forgive you," he kidded her, but it wasn't all kidding. He had been there almost four hours. And, in a dancehall, that runs into a lot of money.

As the minute hand reached two marks from the top, the band swung into *Good Night Ladies*.

Fred looked expectantly at the girl, nuzzled his face in her sweet-smelling hair, then gazed into her eyes. There was no humor in his face now. His eyes didn't laugh. Donna had never seen him so serious.

"Well?"

"Wait for me outside," she told him, starting to leave for the dressing room.

He grabbed her arm roughly, pulled her back.

"Well?" he repeated.

"Yes. Fred."

"Don't be too long." He brushed his lips across her forehead, then left her abruptly.

She stood there a moment before she went to dress. Her arm, where he had grabbed it, hurt, and she rubbed it gently without thinking. His roughness, his utter seriousness had surprised her. It was a quality about him that heretofore hadn't been in evidence. Now she almost regretted her decision. She was frightened, not much, but enough to be dubious as to the night's outcome.

The dance floor was empty.

Donna stood alone.

Then she went to the dressing room.

Donna pushed open the door of her flat, waited for him to enter.

"This is it." She watched him carefully, trying to find again a trace of the temporary brutality that he had exposed to her. But it wasn't there. Ever since she had met him after the hall closed, all the way over here in his car, he had been his old self, gentle, loving, tender.

"Nice. I like it. Where's the bedroom?"

Donna screwed up her face quizzically. "In there."

"Want to hang my coat. Here, let me take yours." He helped her out of the light coat, went into the bedroom to hang them.

"I'll make some coffee," Donna called after him.

"Good deal." He entered the bedroom, looked about for the closet, hung the coats. There was a picture of Tony on the dresser, and he examined it closely. There was a newspaper clipping tucked into the frame, and he stole a quick look at it. It was a short item about two youngsters who had been arrested in the Bronx for carrying concealed weapons. One of the names was Tony Lewis. Nice background for the family, Fred mused. He didn't look for pictures of the parents. Donna had told him some time ago that they had been dead for years. Fred reached over and tested the mattress on the double bed. It was soft and didn't squeak.

"Fred?"

"Yes, Donna. Coming."

"Did you find the closet all right," she asked as he came into the kitchen.

"Yeah. I wanted to make sure they weren't hung wrong."

"Oh. Coffee'll be ready in a few minutes." She smiled at him nervously, then turned to the sandwiches she was making. Fred came up in back of her, his arms around her waist, his face and lips pressed against her neck.

"Please Fred. I'm making sandwiches." Her voice showed her annoyance, her fright.

"Sandwiches aren't that important."

"Yes they are. Right now, anyway."

"Okay, honey." He took his arms away, sat in one of the two small chairs that were in the tiny kitchen. Soon she brought the plate of sandwiches over, placed them on the table, got the coffee. When she had poured it, he grabbed her wrist.

"Come here."

"Please, Fred."

"Come here."

"You're hurting my wrist."

"Come here."

Donna went closer to where he was sitting. He pulled her into his lap, his arms tightening about her.

"Fred. Let's eat this stuff."

"We will." With one hand he reached up and caught her hair, pulled her head down close to his. His lips searched for hers, and found them. He held her squirming head as his lips pressed her mouth eagerly. As he held the kiss, she struggled less and less, until she turned to him and crushed her hot mouth against his. His hands stroked her body tentatively, but she pushed them off.

"Can we eat now?" she gasped, breathing heavily, her breasts heaving as her chest grabbed for air.

"Yeah." Reluctantly, he let her off his lap, watched her as she brought the other chair over beside him and drank her coffee.

"You said you couldn't tell me what Tony did for work, huh?"

"That's right." She munched a sandwich and watched him.

"How long have you worked at the hall?"

"Gosh, I don't know. A coupla weeks."

"Is that all?"

"It's enough."

"I guess you're right. Why do you stay there if you don't like it though."

"Did I say I didn't like it?"

"No. But you sure give that impression."

Donna shrugged. "Maybe. I didn't used to like it. I still can't say I'm in love with the place. but — it's a living. And it ain't too bad, once you learn your way around."

"Hmmm." Fred lit a cigarette, cupping the end in the same manner that Peggy did.

"Why do you do that?"

"What?"

"Cup the smoke that way."

"Don't you know?"

"No. If I knew I wouldn't ask."

"Because it's a reefer. I like to smoke them occasionally, if you don't mind." Fred was watching her closely.

A reefer, Donna thought. Here Peggy's been smoking them right under my nose for two weeks, and I didn't even know it. She kicked herself mentally, watched Fred in fascination.

"Ever seen one before?" he asked, inhaling.

"No." She thought of Peggy, and maybe some of the others. "No, I haven't."

"You sure?"

"Course I'm sure. When I say something, I mean it." Her eyes flashed as he doubted her.

"Does your brother come into the hall very often?"

"Why?" Why was he asking her all these things? Was this what Tony meant when he said to be careful of people asking questions?

"Just curious. I don't think he liked me particularly."

"I don't know about that. He drops in now and then. Not too much though. Why?"

"Why does he come there?"

That stopped her. Why did he go there? Then she laughed at herself. Of course, he was trying to uncover a dope ring there for the police. But she wouldn't tell Fred that. For all she knew, he might be in on the ring that her brother was trying to smash.

"Oh, he comes to see me, to see if I'm okay." She glared her defiance, daring him to question her further. Apparently, though, he was through.

"How about a drink?"

"Sure. What I've got."

"Anything at all." They went into the living-room, leaving the dishes there on the kitchen table.

Fred sat on the couch, and when Donna brought him his drink, he pulled her down beside him.

"This is how I like it. Nice and cozy."

"Mmmm." She nestled close against his shoulder, dispelling the doubts that his questions had raised in her mind. This was too comfortable to spoil. Fred sipped his drink with his right hand, his left caressing the girl's full body, her young ripeness.

He set down his drink, placed his both arms about her, then took her glass from her trembling fingers, placed it beside his, out of the way. His hands and fingers explored her body, feeling it warm up under his constant caresses. Her mouth became more and more passionate and her face flushed as his hands grew bolder.

Donna grabbed his hands and held them.

"Let's not hurry this, Fred."

"Well, let's not stagnate either."

"Please." Looking into her eyes, he couldn't say anything cruel to her. He would just have to play the game her way. She retrieved her glass, drank deeply from it, then grimaced as the strong liquor ran its course to her stomach.

"You're not mad, are you?" she asked the man, her eyes worried.

"No."

"Annoyed?"

"Uh uh." He looked at his glass, puckering his lips. "You call the plays, Donna."

"Thanks." She got up from the couch, went to the bedroom door. "Wait here a minute."

Fred toyed with his glass there on the couch, waiting. She had closed the door between the two rooms.

Soon however, he heard the door open, and turned to see her.

The light in the room shone on the loveliness of several intriguing parts of her exciting body.

"Put out the light, Fred."

He rose and obeyed her command. Then he heard her running across the room toward him in the dark, and he braced himself to meet her surging charge.

CHAPTER FOUR

Donna stood at the window of her apartment, looking down into the ugly street. Across the way, three urchins were playing handball against the grimy wall of a building, yelling in joy whenever a point was made or missed. A push cart squeaked along the edge of the street, heavy-laden with fruit, figs and dates. An old Italian pushed it, wearily, not bothering to look for potential customers. He plodded by like a work horse. Three neighborhood women went by, and were jostled by the boys. They turned back, screaming things at the youngsters in high, raucous voices, a foreign tongue.

Donna glanced down, saw what she was waiting for. Fred emerged from her apartment building, went to his car, parked at the curb. The man who pushed the fruit cart wouldn't have a car like it. It was big, black and shiny, the kind of car a movie mobster uses.



Fred placed his arms about the trembling girl and she soon warmed up under his constant caresses. Her resolution was forgotten in this moment of passion.

Fred unlocked the door, turned and waved to Donna in the window. She pulled her housecoat more tightly about her body, waved back, then watched the car pull away from the curb, head up the street to Third Avenue, turn right into the traffic. A bus pulled up at the corner and vomited a few passengers from its ugly mouth. Donna turned from the window.

Again that morning, Fred had flung veiled questions at her, all of them relating to Tony and what he did. He had been subtle about it, that was true enough. But the point was that he had asked the questions, and this bothered her. She wondered why he was so interested, if he suspected Tony's work with the police. And why should he be so anxious to find out? Unless he had something to be afraid of. That's what bothered Donna now. She went to the small kitchen, put on some coffee, sat and watched the pot. Her thoughts turned again to last night. How gentle he was for awhile, then how savage. There had been no medium for his passion. It had been either brutal or passive. With Fred there was no in-between.

But, why the questioning?

The coffee boiled, and Donna poured the black, sweet-smelling liquid into a cup, replaced the pot. She stirred the cream slowly, blending it with the black to obtain a rich, chocolate-brown color. She lit a cigarette and took the coffee into the living-room. The room was still disarrayed from last night's passion. Donna swore at the work that faced her, then flopped on the couch.

Damn, she thought, what should I do? I should tell Tony about Fred. That's what he said. If anyone asked funny questions, I should let him know. And that reefer Fred smoked! He's probably selling them, an' that's what Tony wants to know. Still, Fred's such a nice guy. I hate to tell Tony. Gosh, what if I was wrong. Then Fred'd hate me for sure. Oh damn! She hit the couch savagely, releasing some of her confusion.

I don't know what to do. I just don't know. Then, she decided. *After all, Tony is my brother, he's working with the cops to help himself as much as them, and I certainly think a lot more of him than I do of Fred.* She walked to the telephone, lifted the receiver and dialed

Tony's number. But as the first buzz sounded, she hung up quickly, flung the phone into its cradle.

I can't. Oh gosh, why did it have to be Fred? The one nice guy I met in years. Why, why why, why, why? She looked out the window again, at the sordidness of the street, and hated it. She went back to the phone, called Tony again.

"Tony?"

"Yes."

"Donna. I—Tony, I think I know someone that you're after. I'm not sure, but I think so."

"Well, who is it?"

"Look, Tony, can you come down tomorrow afternoon? I'd rather tell ya then."

"Tell me now."

"No, Tony, honest, tomorrow, huh? I—I got to make sure. I will tonight, 'n then I'll tell ya."

"Okay."

"Thanks, Tony."

Donna held the phone for a moment after he had hung up. She felt as though she had betrayed Fred. But then, if she hadn't called, that would have been betraying her brother. She was confused again, but not as before. Before the call, her confusion had stemmed from her indecision as to whether or not to phone Tony. Now that she had done it, she worried lest she had done the wrong thing. She thought again, *what if I'm wrong, what if Fred just asked those questions because he was interested in me, what if he's not with the gang, or anything?* She ground out the cigarette, hurled herself onto the couch.

Why in hell do I have to make these decisions? Why? I don't want to. All I want to do is make a livin' an' get by. Get married. Be on the stage. Anything except make these damn decisions!

That night Donna slouched wearily on the bench. It was past two, and it had been a busy night. The hall was still crowded, but Donna had begged off dancing for the past few minutes, telling the eager-eyed men that she was waiting for someone. She was hoping to see

Fred, but she wasn't waiting for him. She was just tired and her feet hurt, and her back was bruised where one of the men had pinched cruelly as she rubbed against him. Peggy crossed the floor, sank down beside her.

"How's it goin'?" Donna asked.

"All right, I guess."

Then she uttered a coarse laugh.

"I don't know how long I'll be all right, though." She stopped laughing, her face falling into an expression of dejection. "When this starts to show, I'm as good as through."

"You can get another job when you leave here. A store job or something."

"That'll be fun. Oh Donna, all I do is think about it, an' worry. Why did it have to happen to me?" Peggy glared bitterly at the swarming people on the dance floor.

"Have you told anyone else about it?"

"Yeah."

"Who?"

"I had to. I mean, well, I had to talk about it, ya know, 'n when you weren't around, I'd tell someone else."

"Who'd ya tell?"

"Oh, I told Ann, 'n I told Rita. Ya know she got fired?"

"No. When?"

"Last night. Pop — " Peggy looked around her to make sure no one was within hearing range of her whispered news. "Pop tried to make her, 'n she wouldn't, so he fired her." Peggy giggled. "Just shows to go ya."

"He's never tried that with me, thank gosh," Donna said introspectively.

"Well, honey, that don't mean he won't. It just means he ain't got around to you yet. But he will."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure? Sure I'm sure. That's why the girls are always changin' here. When they say no, he fires 'em."

"You're still here," Donna murmured, leaving the rest unsaid.

"Yeah." Peggy quieted; "An so's Ruth, 'n Ann and Baby. 'N for that matter, so are you."

"I haven't been here too long."

"No."

"Did you — I mean, did Pop — well, you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I know. An' the answer's yes. A gal's got to eat." Peggy glanced down at her fingernails, ashamed.

"He fires everybody who says no, huh?" Donna continued.

"Oh, for gosh sakes, Donna, I don't know. A lot of the gals may not have. I just know he threatened me with it if I didn't. That's all. Leave me alone."

"Sure." Surprised by the girl's sudden hostility. "I'm sorry, Peg, if I — "

"It's okay, Donna. I'm sorry too. I just don't know what the hell's goin' on since — well, with what I have on my mind."

"Yeah. It's rough, baby."

"Dance?"

Donna glanced up disinterestedly, saw Fred standing there and smiled quickly.

"Sure."

It wasn't until they were on the floor, and Fred had his face nuzzled into her hair that she remembered her suspicions, her doubts, and what she would have to tell Tony the next afternoon. As she danced, she hardened toward the man, began to hate him a little because she liked him so much.

"How are ya, hon?"

"Very well, thank you." She looked frigidly into his eyes. "And you?"

"Swell." Then he caught the coldness, and his brow furrowed. "What's up?"

"Nothing."

"I know there's something, Donna. What is it?"

"Mr. — I don't éven know your last name — "

"It's Haveran."

"Well, Mr. Haveran, I told you once that there was nothing wrong."

"What's with this stuff, Donna? Is it because of last night?" His face was worried, puzzled.

Donna ignored him. Her thoughts ran freely. *Gosh, I hate to treat him like this, but if I turn him over to Tony and the cops, then I can't be feeling sorry for him. I can't. But, gee, he looks so miserable. I —*

He was leading her to a corner table.

"Sit down."

"What do you mean?"

"What did it sound like? I said sit down." His face had angered now at her refusal to tell him why she treated him this way.

"An' if I don't want to?" Donna stuck her chin in the air defiantly.

"Then you're tough out of luck, kiddo. Your time's for hire, 'n I'm hiring it, get it. Sit down," he repeated, then sat beside her. The waiter came and he ordered beer.

"Listen, Donna, you've got me confused. Everything was okay when I left this morning, wasn't it?"

She nodded slowly.

"Then what is it, baby? I'm at least entitled to an explanation."

Donna opened her mouth, started to speak, but stopped when the waiter returned with the beer. After he had gone, she turned again to Fred.

"It's — it's nothing I can tell you about, Fred. It's just better that we stop going together now. I don't want to see you anymore, Fred. Here or at my place. I — it's better that way."

"Why can't you tell me? Is it about your brother?"

There he goes again, she thought, asking about Tony. Why, why is he so interested?

"No, it isn't. May I ask you something?" She went ahead without waiting for his answer. "Why are you so interested in Tony? Here, last night you asked me about him, then at my place that's all you talked about. An' now, you ask me about him again. Why?"

Fred shrugged his shoulders. His suit wrinkled, regained its smoothness. "My interest is in you, Donna. So naturally, I'm interested in anything or anyone that has anything to do with you. You're — Tony certainly does, 'n well, I — "

"Go ahead, Fred."

"I'm worried about him, 'cause *you* are. If he worries you, he worries me. Donna," he reached for her hand, held it gently, "I — " he exhaled his pent-up breath — "I care for you — a lot. Really I do, Donna. I had hoped that we — might make a go of this. You're a sweet gal, real sweet — most of the time. I don't want us to end this way, baby. Please."

Oh gosh, she thought, *don't Fred, don't say it*. She knew now that she cared for him the same way, nothing bindingly strong, but something that could become that way.

"I don't know what to say, Fred. I—I can't think straight." She ran her hand worriedly through her long tresses and bit her trembling lip.

"Why not? Can't ya talk to me, Donna? Tell me what's the matter?" He pressed her hand in desperation.

"No," she shook her head. "Fred, what work do you do? I mean, what's your job?"

His face lengthened, became a mask.

"I can't tell you that Donna. I wish I could, but I can't."

"Are you kidding me?" She looked askance at him. The words sounded like a direct repetition of what she had said regarding Tony, sounded like mockery.

"No, honey. I wouldn't kid you. Not like this. I really can't tell you. Not now."

Donna pulled her hand from his grasp.

"Don't you trust me?"

Fred flung up his hands in a gesture of hopelessness.

"Of course I trust you, Donna. But — look I'll tell you this much, then maybe you'll see why I can't tell you — no, I can't even tell you that. I'm sorry, really sorry. But is it so important what I do? Is that the only thing that counts?"

"No, of course not. I just wouldn't want you to be mixed up in anything, well, you know, anything bad — not that I think you are Fred," she amended hastily. "I'd just like to know what my guy does, that's all."

"And it's reasonable enough, Donna. Except that I just can't tell ya now. Please believe me for the time being, will ya?"

"I — I'll have to think it over, Fred. I'll let you know — what I decide. It — it isn't an easy decision for me to make, 'n if you knew what I know, then you'd see that. It's not that I don't like you."

Fred stood.

"At least, I have a chance, huh?"

"The way it is now, Fred, at the *most*, you have a chance."

Fred's face fell, then he grinned.

"I'll see ya in a coupla days, baby. I got to go out of town for awhile. Business."

"Can't you take me home tonight?" It was three-thirty.

"No, Donna. I—I've got to meet a guy in fifteen minutes. It can't wait, 'n I'll be with him for quite a while."

"Okay." Her disappointment showed in her voice.

"Will you miss me?"

"Sure."

After he had gone, she took her place again at the bench. Ann turned to her, smiling.

"Who's your boyfriend, honey? He's been here a lot lately, hasn't he, honey?"

"Yeah."

Don't want to talk about him, honey?"

"No. I mean, I don't know much about him to talk about."

"Ohhh." Ann nodded wisely. "Well, most of 'em don't tell ya much, except how much they'll pay ya, honey. You get so you don't expect much more."

"He's not like that," Donna defended him.

"No? Listen, honey, they're all like that. Right from the highest guy in the church right down to our ol' pal, Joe Blow. They only got one thing in their minds, honey. An' you know what it is!"

"Fred isn't like that," Donna insisted.

"Yeah? What has he ever done except try to make ya?"

"Well, he's — he hasn't had a chance to do anything else," she claimed weakly.

"Yeah? Listen honey, has he ever asked ya out or anything? Has he?"

"Well no, but he will."

Ann snorted.

"Do me a favor, honey? Tell me when he does, will ya?"

"He will."

Ann snorted again.

Donna brooded. Ann had spoiled it for her now, the nice feeling she had had about Fred, the security he had given her, telling her the things he did. Now Ann made it all sound cheap and sordid, as though he just said those things to try and make her again. *There might be a lot of truth in it for some guys*, Donna argued to herself, *but not for Fred. Damn her anyway, why did she have to spoil it, her and her "honey?"*

CHAPTER FIVE

THE rain angled down from the heavens, splattering on the street below as Donna watched from her window. It wasn't a heavy rain, but it was regular and steady, and it had long ago drenched the parched streets of the city. Now, cars going by would spatter the water from the many tiny puddles, and the people crossing the street would step back from the splashes, then shake an angry fist after the car, or yell obscene things. The three boys still played handball across the street from her apartment. Weather was as nothing to them. The wind changed direction imperceptibly, and threw the rain against her window. Soon little rivulets were trickling down the pane, blurring vision. Donna turned away from the window.

What a rotten day. And in an hour I'll have to go to work in that muck. She went to the bedroom, started to dress. She didn't wear her

good dresses or suits to the hall anymore. What was the sense? As soon as she was there, she would change to her evening dress, and no one saw or cared how she looked before that. She pulled on her slip, noticed that there was a tear under the right arm.

"Hell!" She had fallen into the habit of using that word to express her feelings. And at that, only the milder emotions. No one at the hall used anything less, and anyone who did was looked upon with disfavor. As for the more heartfelt emotions, well, there were words that took care of them very nicely, when used in the proper arrangement.

There was a knock on her door.

Fred? she thought, starting to get a robe, then decided the hell with it. She went to the door, flung it open happily.

It was Tony.

"Hi baby." He swept into the room, grabbed her in his arms. His hands moved over her shoulders and arms. "Got a kiss for your brother?" He grabbed the back of her neck, pulled her mouth up to be kissed. "Mmmmm. Good stuff."

"Tony," Donna laughed. "Have you ever heard of a thing called brotherly love?"

"Heard of it. I invented it." He laughed, grabbed her again. "Gimme another kiss," he demanded, his hands on her hips.

"No, that's enough. One each time you come to see me."

"In that case — " Tony spun about, went out the door. Shortly, he knocked.

"Come in," Donna called, grinning.

"Hello, baby," he rushed to her, kissing her hard, started for the door again.

"Oh, Tony, that's enough."

"Okay." He sat heavily on the couch, his greased hair mussed up from the exercise of a moment ago. "What was it you wanted to tell me? I only got a minute 'fore I hafta run." He watched her expectantly.

Damn, Donna remembered, I was goin' to tell 'im about Fred. I forgot I even called him. Now what?

"Well?"

"I — nothing, Tony. It — it was a mistake, yeah, I was wrong. I thought I had a guy for ya, but I don't."

"What d'ya mean? Who did ya think it was?" There was a worried expression on his face.

"Please, Tony. I was wrong, let's leave it there."

"But who?" He grabbed her arms roughly. "For Gosh sake, this is important, kid. This isn't a game for kids, ya know. Did you see someone passin' dope, or what?"

"No, Tony. I tell ya, it's nothing. A guy asked me a lot of questions, that's all. I — well, I got worried, thought he — "

"What kind of questions?"

"Oh, about you, an' what you do for work, an' — "

"Who was he?" Tony demanded, shouting at her. "Who?"

"I tell ya I was wrong, now for cryin' out loud, you're hurting my arm. "

"You won't tell me, huh? That's obstructing justice, kid. That's a Federal offense."

"Listen to me, will ya?" Donna was mad. "I told ya when I called that I had to make sure. Well, I did, 'n I was wrong about him. Honest, Tony."

"Was it that redheaded guy you were with that night, was it?"

"Please, honey, forget. I was wrong." Donna allowed herself to cry just a little. "Don't go on at me like this, please. I'm tired, 'n — I just don't feel well, Tony. It was nothing."

He released his hold on her, got up.

"Okay, Donna. I just hope you're right about this not being the guy we want." His face showed his disappointment. "Keep lookin' though."

"I will, Tony. Trust me."

"So long."

He slammed the door.

I hope I'm right too, Tony, Donna thought as she heard his footsteps pounding down the stairs. I just hope I am.

Pop hunched himself over the cash box, peering at the bills. His dirty white hair was uncombed, and there was a trace of spittle on his chin. He squinted harder at the money, and his eyes watered noticeably. It was after two. There should be some business soon. He heard steps sounding up the long stairs, and turned until he was looking out the window that faced the entrance. It was Donna Lewis. *Nice girl*, he thought secretly. *Look at the way she walks, the way that lovely body of hers sways when she walks.* He giggled a bit to himself, nodded to her when she called hello. He turned back to the window facing the dancehall, watching her as she walked to the dressing room.

Yessir, nice, nice girl. He giggled again, closed the drawer of the cash box. He ran his trembling fingers through the thinning hair, wiped them on his pants, then got down from the stool and called Carl, a thin youth who served as assistant to the cashier, as well as head man with a broom, after the hall was closed.

"Take over here, Carl."

"Right, Pop."

Pop walked slowly back to the girl's dressing room, opened the door without knocking. They didn't even look up. *Damn 'em, they think I'm not a man, eh? An' I've had half of 'em. Damn independent women.* He looked about the room. *There she is, that Donna girl. Standin' there with just her undies on, actin' fer all the world like no man was in the room. Look at that body. Soft an' smooth and full an' creamy. That's the way I like it.*

Ann glanced up at him. Her dress was pulled comfortably low on her bosom, and Pop's eyes drifted to her.

"You want somethin', honey, or are you just window shoppin' again?"

The girls laughed.

Go ahead an' cackle, you screwy ol' hens, go ahead. You think it's funny, doncha, an ol' man like me still likes to see girlies undressed. Well, you just go ahead an' have your fun, while ya can.

"Just wanted to make sure everythin' was goin' all right, that's all."

"Yeah, I'm sure," Ann laughed, and the girls followed her example.

"That's all I wanted," Pop mumbled, glancing again at Donna. She had removed her brassiere, and was standing, her legs spread, eyeing him indifferently.

As if I was a mouse, or a worm or somethin'. Somebody she can do what she damn well pleases to. Well, I'll fix her wagon, 'fore the night's over. Yessuh, I'll fix her, 'n maybe a coupla others.

He left the room, heard the girls talking about him through the door. He leaned close to the door, trying to hear. All he could make out were two words — and they weren't complimentary.

Then he noticed that Phil, the bartender was watching him.

"You'd do a lot better if you paid more attention to what you're doing at the bar instead of to me, Phil."

"Yessir, Pop."

The man's eyes flicked down to his work, but Pop noted the trace of a satirical grin playing at the edges of his mouth. Pop stalked angrily to his office, slammed the door.

He sat on the edge of the narrow bed, giggled at his thoughts. Then he stretched out on the bed.

They think it's funny, huh? Well, we'll see. It's a long time 'til closin.'

He was awakened by a vague feeling that someone was in his room.

He opened his eyes cautiously, not moving a muscle of his body, saw Tony placing a small package on his desk.

"Tony."

"Hi ya Pop. Didn't wanta wake ya up."

"S'okay, Tony, s'okay. How are ya, boy?" He rubbed his sleepy eyes drowsily.

"Good, Pop. I got ta run, though. See ya."

"What time is it, Tony?"

"Past eight. The place is jumping," Tony informed him. "You better get on the ball."

"Yeah, Yeah," he was still not awake.

"Everythin' goin' all right, Pop?" Tony waited.

"Yeah, yeah, swell."

"I'll see ya then." He spun on his heel, went out. Pop raised himself on an elbow, gazed sleepily at the pictures that lined the walls of the tiny, drab room. Then he got up, the sleep still in his watery eyes, opened the door.

The place was crowded as Tony had said. Pop checked the bench, saw no one and knew that all the girls were busy. He nodded his old head happily, went to the bar and drank a beer.

"Another, Pop?" Phil asked, but Pop shook his head.

"One's enough for now, Phil. You know I only have one after my nap."

"That's right, Pop. But the day might come when ya want another." He watched Pop wander off in the direction of the cashier's booth.

Pop looked at the dancehall, saw Peggy dance by with a tall man in dungarees. Pop nodded to himself as he watched her slim body wriggling in tempo to the music. Then he saw Ann, and cursed. *I told her to be more careful of doin' that. Can't tell when a cop's goin' to show up, 'n if he ever saw her like that, with her dress down like that, that'd be the end of my license. But, he smiled, it's good for business. Fifty men stay here all night, hopin' that someone else will do it.* Pop giggled there in the booth. *Wonder if I should tell 'em that Ann's the only one I got who's brassy enough to try that now, since I fired Rita and June.* He giggled again, sold some more tickets. It was a good night. He checked the cash drawer again, sighed happily at the bills that were stacked inside.

Ah, there's that Donna. The nerve of her, standin' there in that dressin' room, bold as you like. I'll fix her. She'll look nice dressed that way tonight, only she'll know too damn well that I'm in the room.

She was sitting on the bench, and Pop, catching her eyes by leaning close to the bars of the booth, motioned her over. She came, walking slinkily, an insolent expression on her face. She stopped in front of him, her eyebrows raised.

"Well?"

"I wanted to talk to you, Donna."

"Well?"

"Just a minute, 'til I take care of this gentleman." Donna moved

aside, allowed the man to buy another strip of tickets. When he had gone, she asked again:

"What do you want?" Her hands were on her hips, and she showed her anxiety to get back to the bench, to get dancing, to be doing anything but talking to Pop. And Pop noticed, and his anger stirred visibly.

"I want to see you later — after the hall is closed," he told her, then stared hard into her eyes.

"An' if I say that I'm going to be busy?" Donna asked, her mouth curling a trifle.

"You won't say it, cause I'm the manager, an' I'm telling you I want to see you later."

"Okay, Pop." She agreed unwillingly, then walked back to the bench.

Well, Pop thought, watching her, my high and mighty bitch, we'll just see how big and tough you are after I get through with ya. Yessir, we'll just wait an' see. He giggled quietly.

The dance hall was quiet. Several minutes before, the band had played the last selection, packed up their instruments and gone home. The men had straggled out of the hall, and, even now, were waiting downstairs in the hallway for the girls to come down so that they could make them the usual offer. And the girls were in the dressing room, changing from their evening gowns to the more practical dresses for street wear.

Pop sat in his office-bedroom. He had made the bed neatly, had even combed his thinning white hair in preparation for his visit from Donna. Now he sat at his desk, his mussed clothes hanging loosely about his old bones, his hands trembling with age and passion as he twiddled his thumbs, waiting.

He heard sounds from the empty, echoing hall, heard some of the girls leaving, calling their goodnight wishes to others. The door to the dressing room opened and closed several times, and he could hear the high-heeled shoes clicking down the long stairs. Then all was quiet again, until a faint knocking sounded at his closed door. He ran his hands once again through his hair, stood up.

"Come in." He clenched the sides of the desk anxiously, lest he betray his nervous excitement.

The door swung open, and Donna stood there, against a background of hollow darkness that was the hall, the faint light from the overhead, unshaded bulb in Pop's office lighting her face and body vaguely. Her green dress was cut low, and had a square neck line, and her blonde hair was combed back and tied with a ribbon. There was a hardness in her face, but her otherwise sweet appearance offset it.

"You wanted to see me," she reminded him, leaning casually in the door.

"Yeah. Yeah, I did. Come in. Ah, come in," he jabbered at her, motioning for her to come into the room. She stepped a foot inside the door, waited.

"No, no, come in all the way. An' close the door. What I have to say to ya is — ah — is private." He smiled weakly at her, trying to put her at ease. She acted for all the world like an animal approaching a baited trap, fearing to go nearer. "Come in." She stepped further into the room, closed the door. It squeaked on its hinges as she swung it shut, the lock clicking. She still didn't venture further.

Well, Pop thought, wonder if she suspects. Maybe the others told her. Anyway, I don't want to frighten her. I've got to do this right.

He sat at his desk, motioned Donna to the bed. She didn't move.

"What was it you had to say?"

"Well, sit down, an' I'll tell ya," Pop told her impatiently, motioning again to the bed.

"Do I have to sit down?" Donna asked coldly. "I hear just as well standing up, ya know."

"Did you hear me ask you to sit?" Pop asked, his voice quavering.

"Yes."

"Then do it."

"Who the hell do ya think ya are?" Donna cried indignantly. "You may be the boss, but that don't mean I have to stand up or sit down just 'cause you say to."

"All right, all right," Pop gave in. "Don't sit down then. But at least, come closer." He smiled encouragingly, and Donna, almost out



Donna struggled to free herself from the old man's lecherous grasp. "Wait! I tell Tony," she swore. "He'll fix your wagon, but good, you filthy thing!"

of desperation, moved a few steps closer to the lecherous old man.

"You're a pretty girl," Pop began, but Donna interrupted him.

"Is that what ya kept me here after hours to tell me?" she exclaimed. "You got a nerve."

"Shut up. I mean, please listen to me, dear. I — that isn't all."

"It better not be," she warned.

"I like your body," Pop went on, surveying her closely. "Like it very much." Donna pursed her lips, decided to hear the old geezer out. At least, it wasn't as though he were making a play for her.

"I like your legs. They're smooth and long an' — strong." Pop stopped, giggled introspectively, then continued — "I like your hips. I like the nice way they wiggle when you walk, Donna dear. Yes your hips. But, you know, there's one part of you that I like better than any. You know what that one part is?"

"How the hell would I know?"

"Well, I'll tell ya." His eyes moved to her bosom, lighting in ecstasy as he saw the way it heaved with the girl's exasperation. "That's it," he cried.

"Why you crazy old fool! What the hell do ya think I am anyway. You must be out of your mind." She spun about, yanked on the door, but couldn't open it. She grabbed for the lock, but Pop lunged against the door, half-jamming her against it too.

"Don't, my sweet, please don't leave. You can't. Please. Just do that little thing for me. I only want to kiss you, that's all. I won't even touch, you'll see." Then some of the panic left his old eyes as he realized the position he was in. The door was locked, and as long as he kept his body against it, she couldn't get it opened. The hall was empty, everyone had left, and the room, being in the back part of the hall, was practically soundproof as far as people passing on the street were concerned. As all this flashed through his mind, a look of cunning replaced the fright that had been evident until then.

"Stop fooling around now," he cautioned the girl. "There's nothing you can do, except what I want ya to."

"You're crazy," Donna accused him, struggling to free herself, to get the door open.

"You see," Pop said, giggling at her futile efforts, "You can't get out. You might as well do what I say." He grabbed the shoulder of her dress, tugged at it. Donna wrenched from his grip, ran behind the desk. Her dress tore when she pulled away and now as she stood, trembling, watching the old man advance on her, her shoulder was bared, and the straps of her undergarments pulled halfway down her arm. Pop came nearer, a smile playing on his lips.

"Wouldn't it be easier and better for ya if ya just gave in, 'n did what I want ya to?" he asked slyly, his hands groping toward her. His fingers encountered more of her dress, and pulled. He heard a ripping sound, and looked gleefully at her exposed body.

"Wait'll I tell Tony," Donna swore. "He'll fix your wagon, but good, you nasty old thing."

Pop stopped short. He was surprised, and not pleasantly so, Tony. That was right, too, he had brought this girl in here, had said to take care of her. Yes, Tony would be mad if he did this thing, very mad. *He might stop bring me those nice packages.* Drool spilled over the old man's mouth, dribbled down his chin, but he didn't notice. He realized now that he was in a bad spot. The girl would probably tell Tony anyway, now, no matter what happened.

Donna watched him, standing stock-still a few feet from her. She breathed hard, gulping the air, hot and heavy in the small room, perspiring from the exercise and fighting.

Pop slumped wearily to the bed, and Donna smirked to herself. He was defeated, and it wasn't hard to tell. She knew, had known, as soon as she thought of Tony, that he was the trick that would rescue her from what seemed to be the inevitable at the hands of the greasy little man. Thank Gosh.

"Can I go now?" Donna asked him, the wise expression restored again to her face.

"Please, please," Pop begged, "Don't tell Tony about this. Please, Donna. I couldn't stand it. I — please don't tell him."

"What about this dress?" Donna asked, pointing to her ripped garment.

"I—I'll buy you another one. A nice one, I—I'll give ya the money.

Only please, don't tell Tony." She had never seen a face as frightened.

"Well, maybe, if you give me enough dough for a coupla dresses. Maybe then I won't tell him."

"Yes, yes, anything you say, as long as you don't tell. Promise me that."

"All right, I promise."

"I—I'll have the money for ya tomorrow. Honest." His face was miserable.

"Ya better. If ya don't, Tony hears about this, understand?"

"Yes, yes. You'll have it." His moist eyes followed the girl to the door, watched dully as she opened it and left, laughing at him as she did.

Pop listened to her footsteps echo away in the distance, heard her walk down the stairs, then all was quiet. He hunched his old shoulders, sobbing quietly there in his room. After awhile, he got up, wandered out of the office to the girls' dressing room, pushed open the door. He gazed at the long table, at the disarray in which the women had left it. There were various undergarments scattered about haphazardly, a few pairs of falsies, unpacked in their shoe boxes, a dress or two, and some makeup. The room looked as though a tornado had hit it, and that's about what it was like when all the girls rushed in after the last dance, anxious to get downstairs and bargain with the men. Of course, they all weren't like that, but the majority were. Pop went to Donna's place, saw that she had left nothing, and rummaged through the possessions of one of the other girls.

He saw the tip of a letter sticking out from under a pair of stockings. He pulled it loose and picked it up.

It was addressed to Peggy. Pop's hands trembled as he opened it, pulled out the enclosed sheet of paper. Then, before reading it, he went out of the room, flicking the lights out with a wall switch, and went back to his office. There, he locked the door, took off his shoes and shabby pants, and eased himself down on the bed.

He opened the letter.

"Dearest Peggy," it began, and the paper trembled in Pop's hand, as he thought, *yes yes, dearest Peggy*. He remembered when she had

come to him here in this very same room and his body was stimulated.

How nicely I remember you from the few nights we had together. I only hope you remember me as well. You were sweet then, my Peggy, and my thoughts turn more and more to you now that I am gone.

But soon, I will return to the city, and when I do, I hope only that we can take up where we left off. I am doing well with my job, and have had an advancement to assistant salesman for my district.

Please, Peggy, I don't know what your plans are, but please, make no definite ones before you see me.

With all my love,

James

Pop read the letter through again, enjoying the thought of James and Peggy together.

Then, he crawled in between the covers, crumpling the letter in his hand, grabbing the pillow and holding it tightly.

Soon, his snores were the only sound in the stuffy room.

CHAPTER SIX

THE phone rang, and Donna turned over lazily in her bed and pushed a pillow over her ears to shut out the jangling. But the ringing was insistent, and finally she got out of bed, pulling on a robe as she went into the living room to answer the phone.

"Hello." She fought to keep her eyes open.

"Hi, Donna. This is Fred."

"Oh, Fred. How are ya?"

"Fine. May I come up to see you?"

"When?"

"Right now."

"I just got up."

"Then I'll give you half an hour."

"Okay then. Make it forty five minutes, will ya?"

"Okay. See you then."

She replaced the phone in the cradle, walked sleepily back to the bedroom and flopped on the bed. Her hair was mussed and tangled from sleep, and it flowed about her. After a minute, she got up, went to the bathroom and washed. But, when she came back to the bedroom to dress, the sight of the mussed bed was too much for her, and she decided to rest awhile longer. Before two minutes had passed, she was asleep.

The knocking at the door awakened her. The top of her pajamas, unbuttoned, had fallen open, revealing her charms. She pulled them shut, buttoned two of the buttons, then went to the door.

Fred!"

"What did ya do? Go back to bed?" he asked, grinning at the sight of her.

"Yeah, I guess I did. C'mon in." She held the door for him, then closed it and allowed him to grab her tightly, pulling her thinly clad body to him for a kiss.

"Somethin' for ya." He extended a florist's box.

"Ohhh. Flowers?"

"Uh huh. Hope you like roses."

"Ohh, I do. Love 'em." She pulled his head down, kissed him lingeringly on the mouth. "Thanks, Fred."

"Just to show I missed you."

"Hang up your things, honey. I got to get dressed."

"Why?"

His eyes were eager, his mouth partially open.

"Because the answer is no, Fred." It wasn't hard to tell what was in his mind.

"Why is the answer no, baby?" He moved closer to her, held her by the arm. She said nothing, just stared into his face, not wanting to acquiesce, yet, oddly, wanting to at the same time. The sight of the

man, his shock of reddish hair, his large mouth, dilated nostrils filled her with an animalistic feeling, also with the knowledge that here, more or less, had been, or was, safety. His grip on her arm tightened, and her head tilted back slightly to meet his kiss.

Fred grabbed her by the shock of hair that was bunched in the back, pulled her face against his, rolling it from side to side under his kisses.

Donna uttered a slight cry, a sharp intake of breath before he gathered her into his strong arms, and carried her quickly into the next room.

Some time later, Fred yawned audibly, rolled over on his side and looked at the pretty girl beside him. Her body shone with the beauty that follows such things, and her breath came strongly and evenly. He stretched to her, brushed her lips with his own. Donna's eyelids fluttered slightly, but she didn't open them. Fred couldn't make up his mind whether or not she was asleep.

He pushed back her hair from her ear, planted a long kiss on the lobe, then inhaled the sweet smell of her, languidly.

"If there ever were a Utopia," he murmured, "this is it."

Donna rolled over half against him.

"What?" she asked, barely enunciating the word.

"I said, this is my Utopia."

"Hmmm. Me too." She nestled tighter against his body, beginning to arouse herself from the half sleep that is so delicious.

"How have ya been?" Fred asked quietly, ready now to talk.

"Mmmmm."

"Is that an answer?" he laughed.

"Mmmmm."

She raised her mouth drowsily, her lips parted. He kissed her a long time. Then she stretched, sat up, looked down at her body.

"Well, look at me!" she exclaimed.

"I have been." Fred laughed.

"I bet." Then she stared at herself again, contemplatively.

Donna continued to look at the man, her eyebrows slightly raised,

her mouth open, her eyes insolent in a gentle way. It was her way of showing that she was happy with everything, that she was feeling a wonderful, animalistic enjoyment of what had transpired.

"Guess I'll get going," she told him, getting up and walking to the closet. "You'd better too. This is the day the landlord comes for the rent, 'n I wouldn't like him to see you just like you are."

"What's the matter with me the way I am?" Fred asked in mock indignance, looking at himself appraisingly.

"Nothing — for me. I'm just not sure the landlord would love you as much as I do."

They laughed comfortably.

"Why don't you go out an' make some coffee, Fred?"

"Okay, Honey."

In a few minutes, they were dressed and having their coffee in the living room. Fred sat beside Donna on the couch.

"I'll repeat a question I asked when I don't think you heard me, Donna."

"What?"

"Everythin's been goin' okay, huh?"

"Sure. Everything's been fine."

"An' your brother?"

"What about him?" she asked quickly, her eyes going to his.

"Nothing. I just hoped you'd got over worrying about him, whatever you were worrying for."

"Sometime I'd like you to tell me what you do, Fred. I worry about you sometimes." It wasn't true, but she was anxious to know his work to clear up the vague suspicions about him that still hovered about her mind.

"I won't be able to tell ya for awhile," he explained, "for the very true reason that my work is connected with — well, it won't hurt to tell you — it's tied up with the dancehall where you work."

Donna turned startled eyes toward him.

"What do you mean?"

"Just that. An' because it is, I can't let you in on it as yet. Later honey, not now."

Donna wasn't listening to him any longer. So, his work was tied up with the hall. And that reefer he had smoked. It all added up, neatly and quickly in her brain. He must be, had to be, the man that the police and Tony were looking for. Who else could it be? And the questions he asked about Tony. Why those were because he suspected Tony of being a cop. That's why. He thought Tony was with the cops, or knew it, and he was trying to get information out of her, just to find out how close he was to discovery. Pumping her, that's what he'd been doing, in every way possible.

"What's the matter?" He slid an arm about her shoulders, tried to pull her closer, but she jerked away from him.

"Nothing. I was just thinking of all the things I have to do around the place before I can go to work. I—I hate to ask ya this, Fred, but would ya leave so I can get some work done. After you finish your coffee, of course."

"I will if you want me to, Donna. But I was kinda planning on staying awhile."

"Some other time, please, Fred," she said nervously, now that she knew who he was.

"Okay, baby." He finished his coffee in a gulp, rose from the couch. "You're workin' tonight, huh?"

She nodded.

"I'll see ya there, then."

Donna nodded again. She didn't trust herself to try and speak, so afraid was she that she would frighten him by a slip of the tongue. Fred got his coat and hat from the bedroom closet, stood at the door, hesitantly. Then he crossed hurriedly to her, kissed her. Donna felt instinctively like pulling away from him, but fought not to. That would be too obvious, after what had happened a short time ago.

"Bye, baby. See ya tonight."

"Yeah. Bye."

Donna sat perfectly still on the couch until she heard the front door downstairs slam shut. Then she crossed to the window in time to see him wave up to her. She waved back weakly, conscious that her failing to do so would provide him with a tipoff. When his car had

pulled out of sight, she slumped into a chair. *Ohh, Fred, why did it have to be you?* she thought, angrily. *You're such a nice Joe, all the time so nice, an' now you have to spoil it like this.* Then she made herself face the task ahead. First to call Tony, and see what he had to say. Get him to come down, that was the best way. She never could tell him this over the phone.

She dialed his number, her throat constricting in nervousness as she waited for him to answer. After a minute, his voice carried to her over the wire.

"Tony? This is Donna. Can you come down?"

"Why?"

"I finally found out something for ya, Tony. I found the guy you're lookin' for."

"Who is it?"

"Not over the phone, Tony. Come down, willya?"

"Okay, baby. Be right down."

She listened until his phone had clicked off, then hung up hers. She didn't move from the chair, just sat there, waiting for her brother to come.

Fred, Fred, why did it have to be you? she cried silently. *Why you?*

"Who is it?" Tony closed the door as he asked the question. He wasn't wasting any time.

"Remember that redheaded man you asked about before?"

"The one you said you were wrong about?"

"That's right."

"Yeah?"

"I think it's him, after all," she said, hating to tell him, yet knowing she must.

"What do ya mean, ya *think* it's him. Ain't ya sure?"

"I'm as sure as I can be, Tony."

"What are ya goin' on?" he asked shortly.

"Well, in the first place, he told me that he couldn't tell me what kind of work he was doing, 'cause it was tied up with the dancehall, the one where I'm working."



"Can you come down to my place right away, Tony?" Donna asked. "I finally found out something for you. I found the guy that you're looking for!"

"Yeah?" Tony's face had taken on a cautious look, like that of a dog when someone outside of the family offers him something to eat.

"Then, one night when he was up here, he smoked a reefer. I didn't know what it was, but he told me."

"He told you?" He couldn't believe it.

"Yeah. I asked him, 'n he told me. Then I remembered that Peggy was smoking them. I didn't know it was reefers that she was smoking until I saw the way Fred — the redheaded guy — was smoking. Then I knew. He must be giving them to her, an' maybe she's passing them on for him."

"Yeah? Go ahead."

"Well, he's all the time asking questions about you — "

"Copper," Tony muttered under his breath, and his eyes grew frightened.

"What?"

"Nothing, honey. What else?"

"Well, I knew from the questions that he must have guessed, or be suspicious that you're with the police, an' he's using me to see how close you're getting to him." She stopped talking, folded her hands in her lap.

"Is that all?"

"Isn't it enough?"

"Yeah, it's plenty, it sure is plenty. Give me a minute an' let me think this out."

"Why can't ya just call the cops an' arrest him?" she asked, innocently.

"For lots of reasons," he answered impatiently. "In the first place, we don't know where he is now, do we?"

"No."

"An' besides that, we can't arrest him until we have something to go on, besides questions, and suspicions. We got to have proof 'n we ain't got any."

"Ohh. Then I guess I haven't been much help, have I?"

"Sure ya have," he reassured her. "You've been lots of help. But we got to have more before we can make an arrest. Look, here's what ya

do. Don't let him be suspicious that ya know anything, keep him around, until the cops an' me can arrange somethin'. An' whatever ya do, don't let him know I'm workin' for the cops, got that? Just stall him along for awhile. What about this Peggy? Do you know her pretty well?"

"Yeah. Quite well."

"Tell me about her. Does she know that you know she smokes reefers?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, don't let her know. Keep everything the way it has been, understand? Don't let this talk of ours change a thing. We've got something to go on at last, but not nearly enough. So just keep along the same way, an' wait for somethin' to happen. Okay?"

"Okay, Tony."

The young fellow strode to the door, then turned, pausing dramatically —

"Baby, this looks like the break that we've been waiting for. If we go careful, we're goin' to be able to break this little thing wide open. But we've got to take it easy. One little slip up, an' everything we know'll be useless. If this Fred — what's his last name?"

"Ahh — Haveran."

"Okay. If this Fred Haveran gets wise to the fact that we're on to him, he'll just blow town an' disappear. We can't afford to have that happen."

"Okay, Tony, I'll be careful."

"Good. Oh look, sis, I'm goin' to have a big date for ya the day after tomorrow. So keep the day open, will ya?"

"Sure, Tony. What's it about?"

"I'll tell ya then. But it's a secret for now. Just don't forget it, whatever ya do."

"Uh huh. An' look, Tony, if ever I want ya, an' you're not at home, can I call the police and get in touch with ya there?"

"No," he said hastily. "They pretend they don't even know me. That allows me to have more freedom in my undercover work. Understand?"

"Sure. I'll be careful, an' you be, too."

"I will. Don't forget the day after tomorrow."

"I won't. Bye."

"So long."

That bum Fred. Much as she had loved him, she hated him intensely at this moment. Hated him because he, and his gang of dope peddlers were placing Tony's life in danger while he tried to track them down. *Damn you, Fred, we'll get ya. You fooled me for a long time, but no longer.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

DONNA stood at the window, looking into the dirty street. At the corner, one of the 'El' trains rumbled by with a surf-like roar. It was a nice day, as days go. The sky was blue and lucid, and if she pried into her imagination a little, she could picture the way Westchester would look, the brilliant greenness of it, the smooth beauty of the hills, the invisible streams that would gurgle as you passed. The sun reflected momentarily from the windshield of a passing car, blinding her, and she turned from the window.

Eleven o'clock, right on the button. *Where was he, anyway?* The cigarette in her right hand sent slow spirals of smoke upward, causing her eyes to tear from the acridness of it. She checked her attire once more. The green dress looked nice. This one had a low, V neck line that showed just enough of her charms to be provocative, but not enough to be suggestive, if it were possible to draw a line between the two. She checked her stockings again, saw that the seams were straight, checked her hair for the tenth time. Yes, everything was as it should be.

Five minutes past eleven.

Damn it, he told me eleven sharp. She thought again of the little

man she had met at the hall last night. About fifty, she figured, maybe a little less, or a little more, but close to the fifty mark. His glasses had had a habit of slipping off his nose that was slightly comical, only she hadn't laughed. There had been something about the man's face everytime the glasses had slipped that had warned her that he didn't consider it all funny. *Shorter than me, too, she mused. Almost like a little kid, he was so delicate. But that kind has dough, I guess.*

It had taken only a short appraisal of the man's clothes, his bearing, to perceive that he was "loaded." And he had been very impressed with Donna too. Impressed enough to invite her out to his estate for the day. Somewhere in Westchester, he had told her. *I'll have the car pick you up at eleven. My man will have instructions for you. Look nice.*

As if he had to tell her that. She had been angry at the assumption on his part that she didn't know that she should, or wasn't able to, dress.

Stupid little man. Married too, he said. That should make everything fine. What the hell does he do with his wife when he "entertains?" Oh, well, that's his worry. Wonder what he considers a generous amount of money. That's what he promised. Oh, nuts, what can I lose?

She looked again to the street, saw nothing but a taxi inching its way forward through the maze of delivery trucks, pushcarts, and parked automobiles. The three boys were at their handball game across the street. *Well, it wouldn't be much longer, she thought and they'd have the whole damn summer to play their stupid games.* She chuckled at her cynicism, then continued chuckling as she recalled the way she had treated Fred last night. He had come to her immediately upon reaching the dancehall. She'd danced with him, once, then told him, "that's your share for the night." Ohh, that wonderful look of surprise on his face!

A long, black limousine edged around the corner down toward Second Avenue, coming slowly up the street. When it drew even with her apartment building, she could see the chauffeur leaning slightly out the window, reading the numbers on the houses, his mouth set

in a hard line. He stopped, looked up at the windows. But he didn't see Donna standing there, for she was already getting her coat. When he rang her buzzer from below, she spoke to him.

"Just a minute, please."

"It's Mr. Evans car, Miss."

"I know. I'll be down shortly."

"Thank you Miss."

She took two minutes time, just to make sure again that everything was as it should be, then went downstairs. The man sprang from the car, held the door for her.

She settled herself into the soft, resilient seat, leaning back luxuriously. A street urchin pressed his runny nose against the back window, and made a gesture at her with his fingers.

"Get the hell away from here, ya dirty little bum," she shouted, and the chauffeur turned around abruptly. He probably hadn't heard such language since his wife died. Donna noticed him staring at her, reset her face calmly.

"Shall we go?" she asked haughtily, and he nodded, settling his cap onto his head, steering the car away from the curb, out into the street.

The progress to the Hudson River Parkway was slow and tedious, as traveling crosstown always is, but Donna enjoyed it. It was better than a taxi, really, because there were ever so many taxis on the street, but not very many big cars like this one.

The Parkway was flowing with its usual congestion of traffic, but it was possible to make good time, no matter how crowded it might become. She looked through the glass at the man, noticed the speedometer needle at forty-five. *If he goes this fast here near the city,* she thought, *he'll really jump it up when he gets going. He should care,* she laughed. *Ol' Milty's probably got enough dough to pay every traffic ticket that was ever issued.*

"Miss?" The man was talking to her, holding a little tube at his mouth.

Donna looked about for some way to talk back to him.

"In the holder just in back of me, Miss."

Donna lifted the mouthpiece, said — "Yes?"

"In the little drawer, just beside the phone, Miss, you'll find an envelope. Mr. Evans has placed his instructions for you inside."

"Thank you. What is your name?"

"Charles, Miss."

"Thank you, Charles."

"Yes, Miss."

Donna replaced the phone in its receiver, opened the small drawer that Charles had indicated. There was a tissue-thin envelope inside, and, upon opening it, she saw that a message was contained, written in a wobbly hand with green ink.

"*You will present yourself as one of my secretaries,*" the note said. "*Charles is the only one other than myself that knows you are not. You will address me as Mr. Evans, or Sir, whenever my wife or any of the servants are about.*" Well, that was easy enough. "*You will do my bidding throughout the entire day, with no questions asked.*" Still easy, she thought. "*At the conclusion of the day, if everything has gone well, and I am sure that it will, you will receive the sum of one hundred dollars, cash, in another envelope, similar to this one during your return to the city.*" Nice, one hundred smackers, just for keeping the old boy company for a day. Maybe there was something to this "companionship" thing after all. "*If these conditions are not acceptable, please inform Charles at once, and he will return you to your home.*"

"Is everything all right, Miss?"

"Yes, Charles, everything is fine."

"Thank you, Miss."

Donna refolded the letter, noticed there was no name on it, or anything of an incriminating nature. *Smart ol' geezer*, she laughed. *Wonder if he uses this letter for all his women, or does he write a new one each time?*

She unrolled one of the windows, felt the fresh blast of welcome air come swooshing in on her, blowing her carefully combed hair. What the hell, I'll take care of it as soon as we get there, she told herself, enjoying the wondrous good-feeling that came from the smell of country air, unspoiled by the odors of the city. She'd live out

here one day, too, she told herself. An' not too long from now, either. As soon as I get that lead on Broadway. Yessiree, I'll have a place out here that'll make all the others look sick. The thought gave her a sensuous pleasure, and she dug her body even deeper into the cushions, hummed a song to herself as the miles rolled by.

"We're only a mile from the house, if you'd like to comb your hair." The voice of the chauffeur carried back to her through the intercommunication system, and Donna heeded his warning. Drawing a mirror from her purse, she combed her hair hurriedly, and remade her face, applying the lipstick cautiously, lest the bumping of the car should cause her to jar the line. When she was through, the car was slowing to turn into the long spiral driveway that led up from the road to the house.

The house itself was set back a good half mile from the highway to ensure privacy. It was huge and white, looking almost like the Colonial plantations that she had seen in the movies. There were tall, thin trees lining the drive, and a brook ran down toward the road on one side of the car. What a dream, she mused, then, seeing that they were almost at the door, screwed her body around sideways, and, lifting her skirt, checked the seams of her stockings, straightening them hurriedly. Donna caught Charles' eye in the mirror, noticed the trace of a leer playing upon his features.

"We're here," Donna still noticed the leer.

"I'm aware of that," she replied coldly, then realized that he couldn't hear her, since she hadn't used the phone. Well, he could probably tell from the look she had given him what she meant. Donna reached for the door, then stopped herself as she saw that Charles had left the driver's seat and was hurrying around to her side to open it for her. She stepped out coolly, turned to the man.

"Thank you, Charles." He bowed his head in deference to her, or was it to hide a laugh?

The front door opened and a maid stood there, waiting for her.

"Welcome, Miss Lewis."

"Hello." Donna gave her coat to the maid, and went into the library.

The maid told her that Mrs. Evans was in there, waiting for her.

"Hello, my dear." The woman was taller than her husband by several inches, but possessed the same frailness of appearance, as though the slightest breeze would waft her gently away.

"Hello," Donna answered nervously, drinking in the luxury of the room's appointments, the shelves of leather bound volumes, the small bar that stood open and beckoning from beside the fireplace, which wasn't lit.

"I'm Mrs. Evans, dear. Mr. Evans is upstairs, but he'll be down shortly. We're very glad to have you here today. Mr. Evans feels that his secretaries have little chance to get into the country, so when he finds one that he likes, he enjoys having them out here for a day." She bobbed her head vaguely, to indicate that she was through speaking, for Donna to say her piece now. At least, that was the impression Donna received from the woman. When she spoke, it was as if the speech had been rehearsed, down to the last syllable, and Donna wondered if she said the exact same thing to all the "secretaries" that came out to spend the day.

"It's very nice being able to be here, Mrs. Evans. It's a real treat, as you say, for us city workers to get out in the country." There, that ought to settle the ol' gal. Probably word for word what all the others said, too.

"Are you warm? I could light a fire if you're not."

"No, thank you. I'm fine." Donna shrunk from the offer.

"Oh, Milton, Miss Lewis is here."

"So I see, so I see," Milton muttered jovially, yet half afraid of what might have happened preceding his arrival. He hustled into the room with forced energy and gayety. "And how are you this lovely day, Miss Lewis?"

"Very well, thank you, sir."

Evans smiled to himself, mentally relaxing from the fear that the girl would make a blunder. What a horrible thing it would have been if she'd called him "Milty."

"Did you have a nice trip out, Miss Lewis?" his wife asked, but Mr. Evans interposed before Donna had a chance to answer.

"Dear, why don't you go out and look at your garden? It's a lovely day, and Miss Lewis and I would like to discuss some business before we settle down for the day. All right?" Donna was sure that he would have thrown a decanter at her had she refused.

"Why yes, that's a lovely idea. You'll excuse me, my dear?"

"Of course."

"Nice to have met you. I'll see you again." She left Donna with her husband.

"Well. Everything went all right, I trust," rubbing his delicate hands together, then adjusting his glasses as they slipped down on his nose.

"Everything went ducky."

He moved nearer to her.

"And now, perhaps I can collect the fare for the journey?"

"Help yourself." Donna stood rigidly as he enclosed her waist with his small hands, planted a feverish kiss on her lips. He pulled back from her a step, his arms still about her, and looked at her with what he hoped was passion, or something closely approximating it. Then he gathered her to him, pressed his face into her neck.

"Take off the damn glasses, will ya?" she blurted out.

"Oh. Oh yes, of course. Sorry." He slipped the glasses into his pocket, blinked, then kissed her again, his hands caressing her.

"Why, Mr. Evans."

"Let's have no foolishness, young lady. I don't like to be made fun of. You know the saying. Though the roof be covered with snow, there may be a warm fire burning inside."

"Why, that's almost poetry, Mr. Evans. Milty. Did you make it up?" she teased.

"I—I'd ah—offer you a drink,—but my wife. What I mean is, she doesn't approve of girls drinking, you know. But—ah—she goes to bed rather early." He chuckled at the implication, placed an arm around her waist. "Come sit on the couch. It's nice — soft, you know." He led her to the couch, sat beside her, his hand on her knee. "I like the feel of smooth stockings."

"Do you? That's nice."

"Yes, I do. There's something about women's stockings, and — ah — other things, you know. Ha ha."

They were sitting on the terrace that was in back of the house, having tea. They always had tea in this way, at this time, Donna was told, because it afforded them such a lovely view of the setting sun.

Donna looked at the two of them, leaning back in their expensive chairs, their eyes barely open. Mrs. Evans had a vague, ethereal expression on her face, while her husband looked as though he was about to fall asleep.

Soon, the sun had dropped behind a nearby hill, and the air took on a slight chill. The Evans' roused themselves.

"My, it's getting chilly, isn't it, Miss Lewis?"

"Yes, it is, Mrs. Evans."

"Well, you know," she laughed, as though confessing something big. "When I get out here, watching that lovely sight of the setting sun, I just get carried away with it all, and I tend to forget the time or the weather." She laughed a tinkly laugh.

"I imagine." *What the hell else can I say?*

"We'd better move inside now, Milton. We'll play some of our symphony records for Miss Lewis. Would you like that, Miss Lewis?" she asked, tilting her head, bird-like.

"I'd love it." *Well, here we go. Miss Lewis, don't you love that, don't you adore, I mean, just adore Tchaikovsky, but really, don't you? Nuts!*

"Would you care for any more pudding, Miss Lewis?"

"No thank you. Really, Mrs. Evans, I'm full." *Why does she look that way? Did I say the wrong thing? Or did I say it the wrong way? Maybe I should have said, really, I'm quite satisfied with the—what was it—repast. Ha. I'll remember for next time. Or better still, I'll tell the counterwoman at Nedick's that when he asks me if I want another hot dog.*

"Shall we go into the library then?" She turned to her husband.

"Yes, yes, we might as well."

Mr. Evans escorted his wife from the dining room, and Donna followed close behind them. It was hard to say who was supporting whom.

The records that they had gorged down Donna's throat were still lying scattered about the huge machine like big black eyes. Mrs. Evans seated herself beside her husband on the couch.

They sat in awkward silence for a few minutes, then Mr. Evans suggested a liqueur.

"I don't think it would do any harm to Miss Lewis' system, do you, my dear?" looking questioningly at his wife.

"No, I don't think so. Would you like one, Miss Lewis?"

"You bet." *I'm getting fed up with this beatin' around the bush. I don't give a damn if it did shock her, she asked me if I wanted one, an' I told her.*

Mr. Evans brought her the drink in a gold-flaked cordial glass, giving her an admonishing look. Then the silence descended upon them again. *If this is the way rich people spend their nights*, Donna thought, *I'm glad I ain't one of 'em.*

After what seemed hours to Donna, Mrs. Evans rose from the couch.

"And now, if you'll excuse me, it's my bedtime. I can't stay up, gallivanting around like I could when I was a young girl."

Were you ever? Donna thought bitterly.

"You will excuse me, won't you, Miss Lewis?"

"Sure." *That look again. Well, the hell with it.*

"Good night."

"Night."

Mr. Evans was rubbing his hands again when he came back from the door.

"Well, hope this day hasn't been too much of a strain for you, my pet. Let's have that drink now, shall we?"

"Shall we? Brother, I'll say, an' make it a double for me."

"All right, all right." He rubbed his hands, and his eyes gleamed as he prepared the drinks.

No wonder you're happy, Donna thought. *Nothing like a few shots to warm up the ol' fires, is there?*

"Here we are, Miss — Donna. Here's to you."

"Oh no, here's to you. You might need it."

"Ha ha. Kidding again, I see. Well." He drank from his glass and Donna followed suit.

"Good."

"Yes, good." He set his glass on a cocktail table, beckoned to her.

"Come over here, will you?"

"Sure." She went to him, stood before him. He went through the same ritual as he had that afternoon while she stood passively. *But, she thought, for a hundred bucks, I ain't gonna kick.* His hands started their insatiable caressing, and Donna, her mind cold to all this, her body nearly so, wished he'd hurry up and get it over with.

As soon as the car had left the gates, Donna opened the drawer, opened the envelope quickly. Sure enough, there they were. Five twenty dollars bills. Not bad for a day's work, she congratulated herself. And he'd asked her back, too. Was she going? For a hundred bucks, why not?

The stretch of road they were traveling was desolate, and Donna was startled out of a partial reverie by Charles' voice.

"Have a good time, honey?"

Donna grabbed the intercom phone.

"Miss Lewis to you, servant."

"An' nuts to you, tramp."

"Why you — where do ya get off? Wait'll I tell Mr. Evans."

"You won't tell Mr. Evans, sugar." His voice taunted her.

"What do you mean? As it happens, he's asked me to come out again, sometime."

"He tells that to all the gals, honey. Just so they won't raise a row too near the house. Then I set 'em straight, when we get where it won't do no harm."

"You're lying," she accused him, but even as she said it, she knew he spoke the truth.

"Am I? I don't think so."

The big car slowed rapidly, and turned into a small, forgotten lane, overgrown with weeds.

"Where are you taking me?" Donna asked in sudden fright. "Take me back to the highway."

"Not for a minute sister. You and I are goin' to have a little talk."

"I don't want to talk to you. Turn around."

The man ignored her, stopped the car under a huge, widespread tree, turned off the motor and the lights.

"What are you going to do?"

"Wait," he commanded.

He got out his door, opened hers immediately, climbed into the back seat with her.

"I just know that you're goin' to have sense enough never to report this to anybody, sweetie. You'd never get anywhere."

"Report what? What do ya mean?"

"Haven't you guessed?" He reached toward her, but she flung herself into the farthest corner of the seat.

"Now, that ain't goin' to do you no good, honey. This is part of my pay from the ol' boy. I get my turn on the way home."

"Not with me you aren't."

"Oh no." He lunged at her, enclosed her, trapped her with his strong arms. "C'mon, kid, stop fightin' me. It won't do no good, I tell ya."

Donna struggled even harder in his arms. But it was no use. He was much too big, much too strong for her. He handled her as he would a child, with as little effort. His face loomed near her. But even as she forbade him, his mouth covered hers, smothering her words. And even as she hated him for what he was doing, she exhilarated in the strength of the man.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DONNA turned on the shower more fully, so that she could recapture the first delightfulness of the tingling water. Quick little rivulets ran down her body, moving fluidly over its soft surface, almost like the delicate hands of an accomplished lover. The heat of the water transmitted itself to her body, but before the osmosis had reached its climax, she flicked off the hot so that only the cold water poured over her. At the first contact she uttered a little shriek, but soon was enjoying the shocking effect.

She stepped from the shower, wrapping herself in a large bath towel as she went to her room, where she flung her naked, dripping body onto the bed, rolling about pleasurably in the dampness.

Then she was quiet, her eyes closed. There was still a few minutes before she would get dressed and grab a cab to the apartment where Tony had told her to meet him. She could remember his conversation perfectly, word for word, even with the proper tonal inflection, although he had called her early that morning.

"— so you'll have to come here. I won't be able to bring you," he had said, then had paused as though what he had to say next wasn't easy. "Look, Donna, I want to warn ya about tonight." And she had said, "Yes?" eagerly.

"Well, it's not going to be just a party, understand? it's like this. Another fella an' me from the police department are arranging it, see?" She hadn't, but had said nothing. "Everyone else that'll be there, except for you an' me, and Martin, that's the guy I'm workin' with; everyone else'll be suspects, see? An' since we're after a dope gang, ya know, why this is gonna be a dope party. I don't want ya to touch that stuff, though, baby. There'll be liquor an' stuff. Leave the hashish for the addicts. Right?"

"Sure, Tony. I guess," she added dubiously.

"You just stick with Martin, an' he'll watch out for ya."

"Okay." Her doubts still carried to him, however, for he added reassuringly:

"Don't worry, Donna. You know I wouldn't get ya into something that was wrong, don't cha?"

"Sure, Tony."

"Well, look. You meet me here at eight o'clock, an' I'll take ya over there. I can't come down there for ya, kid, I wish I could, but I can't. Take a cab to my place."

"Okay, Tony."

"See ya, kid."

And now it was getting close to the time. Donna rose from the bed, walked nakedly to the dresser, inspected her underwear, selected finally her paper-thin panties and bra with the thinness in the right places. She dug around for her garter belt, came up with it at length, and slammed the drawer.

She crossed to the bed and sat on it, pulling on her panties. She liked the feeling of the silk on her body and stretched the process for that reason. Before she put on her bra she held it up, putting her eye against the peep-hole in it, then giggling, slipped it on.

When she was fully dressed, she checked herself in the mirror, then went downstairs to get a cab.

A dope party, she thought. *Well, they say ya learn something new everyday — and every night too, I guess.* She waved at a cab, heard the brakes slammed on, saw the cab back up toward her.

At least it's better than working behind a counter, she congratulated herself.

Donna crossed her shapely legs, took the drink that Tony handed her.

"You got it all straight, sis?"

"I think so, Tony. I'm just going to be there so Martin will feel free to do what he has to — "

"An' if he got any other girl, why, he'd be kinda tied down, ya



Donna crossed her shapely legs and took the drink that Tony handed her. He looked at her. "Sometimes I hate the folks for making me your brother!"

know, 'cause she wouldn't know he was a cop," Tony said, finishing the sentence for her. "Just be nice to him, an' do whatever he says, 'cause everything is gonna help tonight."

Donna nodded that she understood, and Tony grinned.

"We'd better head. We're meeting Martin an' some of the others at a bar near here." He looked longingly at his sister. "Sometimes I hate the folks for makin' me your brother."

"Why?" she asked innocently, but there was a knowing look on her face.

"You know damn well why," he said urgently, his hands stroking her face.

She extricated herself, turned to him.

"Don't we have a date?"

"Yeah," he affirmed, and his voice was tired. "We'd better go, I guess."

They met Martin, a large, muscular, well-dressed man at the bar. If it had been after hours, the bar would still have been open, it was that kind of a place. Martin greeted them effusively, then introduced Donna to the others at the table. Tony already knew them.

"Donna, this is Jeanne, Janice, Rose — " pointing to a blonde, brunette and a redhead respectively. It was unusual seeing the three basic types of hair so closely grouped, and Donna noticed interestedly the contrast of shadings. All the girls were attractive, well-built, and dressed handsomely.

"And this is — Roger," Martin told her, nodding at the stout man who was with the girls. Roger looked like a banker.

The seven of them sat together at a large, circular table, ordered drinks. They talked casually, with pauses between conversations, the usual bar talk. There seemed to be no hurry on anyone's part to get on to the party.

But no one went diligently to work getting drunk, as is usual in any party of drinkers. Everyone seemed to be expecting something, although Donna had no idea what it could be. She caught Tony's eye, smiled, then heard Martin talking to her.

"You're a pretty girl, Donna. From now on, I'm going to let Tony take care of *all* my blind dates." He slipped an arm about her shoulder, his fingers stroking the warm bareness.

"You're sweet to say that," she answered, playing right along with him. "You must be Irish, to have so much blarney."

He laughed. "It's not considered blarney when it's the truth, is it?" His face was close to hers, and when she laughed, he could feel her warm breath.

"I don't know. I don't know that much about it."

Finally, after sitting around for almost two hours, drinking and talking, Jeanne stood up to go, then invited all the rest of them up to her place for a nightcap. Rose excused herself, saying she would phone her boyfriend, and have him meet her there.

They drove in two cars, Tony's and Roger's, to an apartment building in one of the better sections of Manhattan. Jeanne's apartment was large, spacious and pleasantly decorated with Chinese murals.

Jeanne and Janice provided two bottles of Scotch from a bar that Donna had thought was a phonograph cabinet when it was closed. They mixed drinks for everyone, then went into another room. Donna sat between Martin and Tony on the couch. Roger was in the opposite corner, trying to kiss Rose, but she kept telling him that her boyfriend was coming up soon. Of them all, Roger was the drunk-est. His eyes blinked drowsily as he stammered his pleas to Rose, but she would have none of them. Defeated Roger went to an arm-chair and slumped heavily in it.

Donna was nervous, even though Tony and Martin seemed to be perfectly composed.

Well, they can be, they know what's going on, they know what'll happen next. I don' even know when anything's gonna happen, let alone what! She slipped her hand into Martin's reassuring one, settled back, sipping her drink, decided to wait it out as calmly as possible. Her mind was full of ideas about what might conceivably take place.

"Want another drink?" Martin asked, getting half-up, his empty glass clenched in his hand.

"No thanks," looking at the half-full glass that was hers. "I think I'll wait awhile."

"Okay." He lumbered over to the bar to replenish his own glass. Tony turned to her, talking a mumble out of the side of his mouth.

"How's everything?"

"All right. When do things start to happen?"

"Pretty soon. Remember what I told ya. Stay with Martin, be nice to him, an' keep off a tea kick, got it?"

"Sure."

"Sure ya won't have a drink, Donna?" Martin asked as he returned from the bar.

"Positive, thanks." She smiled at him, and he squeezed her hand.

Roger wheezed from his corner, heaved himself up, and crossed to what *was* the phonograph, checked the records, then turned it on.

Soon, Jeanne and Janice returned from the other room. Janice was wearing a silk negligee that only served to enhance her physical beauty. As soon as she entered, Donna felt smothered in the revealing gown that she was wearing.

Jeanne, on the other hand, had just put on a pair of house slippers, and otherwise was dressed exactly as before. Rose was restless, and cast furtive eyes at Roger to make sure he stayed in the chair, and didn't awaken enough to start propositioning her again. She kept looking at her watch and then the door, and it was obvious she was waiting for her boyfriend.

He arrived soon thereafter, a tall, swarthy, dark-skinned boy, extremely handsome and lithe. He joined Rose at once, ignoring the propriety of introductions, but Martin leaned close to Donna and told her that the fellow's name was Bob.

They all sat around and talked for another hour, and Donna was beginning to believe that Tony had been wrong about this going to be a dope party. What were they waiting for? The conversation was similar to that at the restaurant, in that it seemed as though everyone was waiting for something to happen, waiting, nervously and with a trace of furtiveness that they hid behind smiles, drinks and laughter that somehow didn't come off.

Martin offered her another drink.

"No thanks, really. I'm almost tight already."

"Aw, go ahead. Another drink won't hurt ya."

"Well. What do you think, Tony?" She turned to her brother.

"Not up to me, sis."

"No, it isn't," Martin interposed, his face grim and serious, and slightly angry. He looked directly at Tony.

"Why don't you hook up with one of these nice girls?" he asked, and the request sounded like an order. "I'm sure you'd have more fun than you will sittin' here with me and Donna."

"Yeah," Tony mumbled, seemingly undecided. "Yeah, I think I will."

"That's a good boy." When Tony had wandered over to the other side of the room, and Jeanne, Martin turned to her, his eyes leering at the exposed flesh, his hand stroking the warmth of her shoulder.

"Why stay here?" he asked, laughing nervously. "Let's you an' me ditch this thing an' go to my place," he offered.

Donna laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"You can't be serious about leaving yet," she giggled, the drinks affecting her.

"Why can't I?"

"Look. Tony told me about — well, about — what you're doing."

"Ohhh?"

"Yes. So, you see, I know you have to stay." She grinned proudly at him.

"Tell me what else Tony told you." Martin demanded, his eyes flicking casually to where Tony was kissing Jeanne's neck.

"Well, not much, but — " she stopped.

Janice had left the room for a minute, and had returned with a half-ounce bottle filled with something white. She put it on the coffee table, unopened, and put another record on the machine that had been replaying *Saint Louis Blues* for a half hour. Jeanne, who had been sitting in Tony's lap, got up and went to the table, examining the bottle, but not touching it.

Donna watched, fascinated. She knew that this was dope of some kind, knew that the party was about to get under way.

Martin whispered in her ear.

"Know what that is?"

"No," she eyed it with a weird feeling that something in that bottle was calling out to her, drawing her toward it.

"That's a 'pomo,'" Martin whispered, then asked Jeanne —

"How much did ya pay for it?"

Janice was the one who answered.

"I got the thing for fifteen."

"You were cheated. You shouldn't have had to pay more than ten bucks for that. It doesn't have any more than ten grains of 'C', if that."

They argued about that for awhile, but Donna didn't listen. The sounds of the argument, at one and the same time heated and repressed, formed a background to her own thoughts. She had never been on a dope kick, had never felt the effects of one, but there was something about the bottle, the whiteness inside that was the few grains of cocaine, that caused her to realize the power that the stuff could influence over a person, any person, herself not excluded. She was drawn to the bottle irresistably. Had she been sober, she would have forced herself to drive such thoughts from her mind, but half-drunk, her inhibitions reduced to practically nothing, she allowed herself to think freely of the bottle.

Janice, walking over to a wall safe, took her attention temporarily from the bottle. The brunette took two small pieces of paper from the safe, slammed it shut, then carefully put the pieces of paper next to the "pomo."

Martin informed Donna that these were "decks" of cocaine.

The conversation that had been humming about the room, died down.

Roger wheezed, coughed, but no one looked at him.

All eyes were on Janice.

She took a nailfile and two small mirrors from her pocketbook. Then took one of the "decks" and made three small piles on one of the mirrors.

Then she put one of the piles on the other mirror, carried it over to Jeanne, who was sitting on Tony's lap again. Tony pushed her off playfully, yelling "Take that stuff away from here," but Jeanne regained his lap.

"Don't be flat, pal. Let's pick up on some freeze."

Janice went into the bathroom and got another glass, the kind that doctors use in their laboratories for blood tests and the like. She put another pile on this, and took it to Rose, who was with Bob in one of the corners. The girl shook her flaming red hair slightly, and Bob turned up his nose at the stuff, looking as contemptuous as he dared, still not wanting to offend.

Janice then offered Tony the glass, then Martin, then Donna and was refused in all quarters.

She put a hand on her hip, her other hand holding the glass, and pouted.

"You're a helluva bunch of guys, letting us sleigh-ride alone. Ol' Roger there'd join us, if he were awake enough to know what the hell was goin' on."

Jeanne was sitting on a divan, greedily eyeing the white stuff on the mirror.

Martin leaned close to Donna.

"Know why they use mirrors?"

"No. I don't know nothin' about any of this stuff."

"It makes the dose look larger."

"Ohhh."

Martin slipped a trembling arm about Donna's rigid body. She had achieved the mellowness of drink, only to have the whole effect destroyed by the startling things that were happening.

Martin stood up, grabbed Donna's hand.

"C'mon, before anyone else gets in there," he said, indicating the next room.

"I don't want to go in there," she told him.

"Look, do you want to stay out here an' watch what's gonna happen in a few minutes?" he asked, acting as though he couldn't believe her to be so callous.

"What's gonna happen?" Donna asked fearfully.

"I—I'd rather not say. But believe me it would be better for ya if ya went into the bedroom."

"All right."

Donna allowed the man to lead her into the room, heard him lock the door, then felt his rough hands caressing her softness.

"No, don't."

"Aw, c'mon."

"No."

"Please, Martin, we don't have to keep up pretenses in here." She pushed him away, went to the sofa and sat on it.

"What do ya mean?" His face completely bewildered.

"Oh please, now. I told ya, Martin, Tony set me straight on the whole deal. I thought you knew that I knew."

"Yeah, honey, I knew that you were on to it. Tony told me that all right. But what's that got to do with us havin' a little fun."

"Because I don't know you well enough, for one reason. An' I don't believe in 'havin' a little fun' just for the helluvit. So let's just keep this as it was supposed to be, shall we?"

"Well, if it's money you want, you know I'll be more than glad to — "

"It's not money. I just don't feel like havin' anyone make love to me, do ya understand that? I said, let's keep it as it was supposed to be." Her eyes glared.

"But — " again his confusion was evident. "That's the way it is supposed to be — isn't it?"

"No. Don't be silly."

"But Tony — " he stopped, looking at her young body, the fullness of it. She had leaned back now, and he wanted her badly.

"Oh the hell with it. Forget everything that was supposed to be," he uttered, then clamped her in his grasp, his lips, hot and rough, at her throat.

"Stop it, will ya?"

"I don't get you," Martin informed her bewilderedly. "I really don't."

He sat beside her reclining form, but his hands still continued their strong caresses.

"Stop it. I'm going to tell Tony now, no matter what happens," she threatened, but the big man only laughed in her face.

"You tell him that you didn't cooperate, an' he'll probably smack you from here to Hell an' back."

"I don't think so, Mr. Wiseguy. Tony takes pretty good care of me."

"Yeah." Martin laughed, but his face sobered immediately. "Look, Donna, this has been good, ya know, plenty of laughs, but I don't want to wait any longer. Let's get down to work, if you don't mind too much."

"Oh, but I *do* mind," she said, sitting up. "Let's go into the other room."

She started to rise, but he forced her back.

"I told ya, I'm through kiddin' around. Now let's stop it, ya hear?"

"I don't happen to be kiddin'. Let me go."

"What did Tony tell ya?"

"Let me go."

"What did he tell ya?"

"Stop it. You're hurting."

"What?"

"He said to be nice to you, an' not to question anythin' you did, 'cause it was all important." She tried to twist out of the man's grasp, but couldn't.

"What do ya think that means, 'be nice' to me?"

"It doesn't mean what you think it does."

"You're wrong. Listen, sugar, Tony told me you'd cooperate. So I'd advise you to, or else I'll tell him."

"You lie!"

"About what?"

"About Tony saying that!"

"No, baby, I don't. Didn't he tell ya that's why you an' me was fixed up. Tony wants a new territory, sugar, a better one, an' if you cooperate, he'll get one. So what d'ya say?"

"What are you talking about?" Donna's mind refused to coordinate.

She couldn't focus her brain enough to make sense out of what Martin was saying. It didn't fit. Maybe the man was just drunk. But that was the awful thing, because he was as sober as a man without a drink would have been.

"Look, Martin, I know you ain't drunk. Maybe you got delusions or something. But anyway, will ya run the record a little slower. I don't follow a thing you're sayin'."

"Sure. Tell me something first. What does Tony do for a job?"

Donna looked anxiously at the man, afraid suddenly of what she had so implicitly believed.

"He's working with you."

"Doing what?" Martin smirked evilly.

"Trying to catch a gang of dope thieves an' peddlers." She would have continued, but Martin made further speech impossible, he laughed so hard. He held his stomach, rolled back and forth on his torso, as he was completely enveloped in laughter.

"... That's ... a hot one ... Tony ... telling you ... that ... That's ... the best one ... yet ... he-he- ... trying to catch ... ohhh why ... we're ... "

"Stop it!" Donna ordered, then repeated, louder. "Stop it!"

"Okay ... I, just ... sorry. Baby ... you've been given one of the funniest bum steers of the century, ya know that? You have really had the bull tossed at you."

"Stop talking in circles, an' tell me what ya mean," she ordered angrily, fighting back the tears.

"Why sure, honey. Tony told me he had a nice babe for me tonight. That's you. An' as for runnin' in dope peddlers, why he an' me, we're just as satisfied if we can just *run* the stuff. That's his racket baby. He ain't no cop. Wow, that's a hot one."

"Did he tell ya I was his sister?"

The big man sobered completely.

"No, honey, he didn't tell me no such thing."

"Well, I am. Do you think I can believe that he'd sell his own sister down the road for—a—a—promotion!? Not by a long shot."

"Well, it's kinda hard to believe for *you*, maybe, but it ain't for

me. Tony's goin' to the top of this thing, an' nothing's gonna stand in his way. I *know* Tony, kid. I can believe it. Sit down, you ain't goin' nowhere."

"How do I know you ain't lyin', wiseguy?"

"Well, it ain't hard to see that Tony's been doin' all the lyin' so far. I didn't tell ya I was a cop, did I? "

Donna admitted to herself that it was true, that Tony *had* lied to her. And if he had done it concerning this much, maybe the rest *was* all untrue.

"Why — why does he hang out at the dancehall then, if he ain't tryin' to catch someone?" But she knew the answer even before Martin told her, it was so obvious.

"That's one of his drops, baby. He gives it to the girls, an' then they pass it on, see?"

Donna broke down and cried, didn't try to force Martin's hand from roaming soothingly. She wept long and hard, then sat up.

It wasn't possible, she told her tortured mind, it just wasn't possible. But then, everything seemed to fit. Why he wouldn't let her call him at Police Headquarters, why he always had nice clothes and a big car, and the girl's coat, that night when Tony had been celebrating his birthday.

Fred!! She must think clearly now, she knew. She felt Martin's caresses but she couldn't be bothered with him. If it were true about Tony, and there was no doubt left in her crushed mind, then Fred — Fred must be a cop, he *had* to be. That was why he had smoked that reefer that time. He had known that Tony was in on the gang, had thought she might conceivably know something too, and had smoked the reefer, figuring that she might talk more freely if she thought he didn't know about it, just was an addict.

A warm feeling for the redhaired man came over her in her shocked misery. She knew that she had to see him, had to talk to him. She could see now how wrongly she had treated him, how Tony had forced her to dislike him with the lie about being a cop. And she had trusted Tony so, loved him so. This was the way he repaid her . . . letting Martin use her.

But why had he put her in the dancehall, if he worked it? There could only be one reason, she told herself, forcing her mind to release the conclusion.

If she had got any information for him, rather than use it for police purposes, he would thereby have known of a leak in the organization, a slip-up, and by her information would have been able to stop it, to deal with it before it got out of hand.

Then Tony must know that Fred is a cop, she thought. He must, especially when I told him that Fred had been askin' those questions about him.

The numbing realization of what was what, the clear, lucid picture of how Tony had duped her flooded over her senses, obliterating all else.

She didn't feel like crying, knew that the thing was too big, too shocking to permit tears. Suddenly, knowing she couldn't cry, she wanted to, badly, and made noises with her throat, short, ugly, coarse, strangling noises.

Martin mistook the sounds for passion, and he became bolder.

Donna was only vaguely conscious of what he was doing. She couldn't think, couldn't reason, couldn't arrange anything in its proper order. She knew that what Martin was doing was wrong, in that she had no desire for him, but she knew also that it was beyond her power to stop him. It didn't matter any more. Nothing did. Only one clear thing, one strong fact forced its way through the morass of her mind, and stood with burning clarity before her.

She must contact Fred. Much as she had loved Tony, much as she still felt an unreasonable emotion toward him, in view of what had happened, the only thing for her to do was to tell Fred, and then try to forget everything. It would mean Tony would go back to jail, but that, right now, wasn't important.

She thought of him, his protecting arms, the niceness of the way he made love to her—at least—most of the time. And suddenly, with a warm glow emanating from her body, she wanted him, wanted him near. The feeling grew stronger, and it was a sensuousness that enveloped her as she thought of him.

Martin was breathing hard, and strange noises were coming from his throat. Then he took her in his arms and Donna shuddered, felt sick. But the hell with it.

She could do nothing to stop Martin. There was only one thought in his mind and with a meekness Donna didn't know she possessed, she gave up the struggle. Closing her mind to Martin's bold caresses, Donna was still as the tears coursed down her unhappy face.

CHAPTER NINE

DONNA'S bed was rumpled, the blankets were kicked down at the foot, and the sheets were in disarray. Her clothes were lying haphazardly about the room, and over the arm of the chair where she had thrown them upon arriving home the night before. She was still as death on the bed, the sound of her breathing heavy and regular, although during the night she had slept fitfully. But now it was late afternoon, her emotions had dreamed themselves out, and she rested.

The sun, casting its rays obliquely against the windows, shot its light almost horizontally across the room, wherever it entered.

The electric clock on her dresser hummed silently, while, from the kitchen, one could hear the methodical tick-tock of the old alarm clock.

It was quiet outside. The usual rumblings and murmurs, the car and bus and taxi and truck and elevated and subway sounds of the city were diminished, and the women, on their way, or coming back from shopping didn't yell and screech as they usually did.

Donna stirred, her eyelids fluttered.

Her eyes were red-rimmed from the tears she had shed the night before. Whatever tears might have been shed at the party were as nothing when compared to the avalanche that had come when she had been home, alone, and the door was shut.

Now, this morning, she felt hazy and weak. Her mind didn't function for a time, and during that period, only one thought was permitted her. *Fred!*

I'd better call him and get it over with, she thought, hating herself for doing it, hating herself for treating Fred so badly, hating Tony for telling Martin he could have her, not telling him that she was his sister.

She angered as these thoughts crossed her mind, and the heat of her anger carried her across the room and to the phone. Only as she lifted the receiver did she remember that she didn't have Fred's number, had no way of contacting him. She hung up morosely, sat again on the couch.

The dancehall is the only place now. If he doesn't show up there, I'm sunk. He was going out of town, but he's probably back by now.

She got up, went into the bedroom to dress. If she hurried, that might make it all the sooner she would see him, even though he usually didn't show up in the evening until after eight.

The phone rang in the other room.

Fred?!

His name leaped into her mind, and she raced to the phone, hoping she was right.

But maybe it was Martin, calling her for another date, or something. She slowed her pace.

The phone rang again.

Donna lifted the receiver.

"Hello?" Her heart was beating wildly.

"Hi, baby."

Donna's throat constricted in fear and anger and hate.

"Baby, ya there?"

"Hello, Tony."

"What did I do? Wake ya up?"

"No." The tightness in her throat stayed, and she found it difficult to speak.

"I just wanted to thank ya."

"Oh?"



"Gee, honey, it's good to see you," Peggy told Donna. "Look, you didn't do anything with a letter I had here a couple of days ago, did you?" she added.

"Yeah. You came through like a real trouper last night, honey. I'm sure we'll catch the whole gang, now." His voice had a trace of forced jubilation.

"How did Martin like it?" She fought to make the question casual, but her bitterness came through . . . She hoped he hadn't noticed it. She wanted to surprise him with her knowledge.

"Huh? Oh, he thinks the same thing I do. We're all set now."

"Tony, don't you think it's about time you stopped lyin' to me?"

There was a long silence from his end of the line, then his voice, unsure, asked:

"What do ya mean?"

"I mean that Martin an' I had a little talk last night, a little talk about you."

"That bum. What did he say?"

"Don't ya know what he said?" And she added sarcastically, "Honey?"

"Why—no, I don't."

"I wouldn't do what you told him I would, Tony. He got mad. He told me a lot of things. He told me the truth, Tony. Why don't you?"

"I . . . I . . . I don't know what to say, Donna. I . . . didn't—what did he tell you?"

"About you, an' the party, an' runnin' dope, an'—oh, everything that you've been lyin' to me about."

"What are ya goin' to do?"

"What can I do? I'm going to call the cops."

"No! Look, Donna, baby, honey, don't do anythin' 'til I talk to ya. Will ya promise me that? Will ya? I . . . I can explain it all, honey. Honest. Stay right there an' I'll be right over."

"No, Tony."

"What do ya mean, no?"

"I'm not stayin' here. I'm goin' to work. It won't do you any good to talk to me. My mind's made up."

"Oh, but look, Donna, I—"

Donna hung up, slamming the phone into its cradle with all the force she could muster.

Damn him. Calling up to thank me. Thank his own sister for being a slut. Damn him.

She stalked to the bedroom, more determined than ever to tell Fred all about everything, as soon as she could see him.

She went to the closet, jerked her newest evening dress from its rack . . . ripped off her brassiere . . . pulled the dress over her head, felt its slinky tightness ease itself down over her svelte body . . . When it was on, she looked at herself in the mirror . . . her breasts accentuated by the tightness of the bosom . . . her thighs slender and smooth . . . her waist small, her stomach flat . . . turning sideways . . . the slit, showing her leg above the knee . . . the slit.

Looking at it, she hated it, hated the dress, hated herself for what she knew she had to do.

She reached down, grabbing the dress on both sides of the slit. She yanked, and the dress tore, the slit extending itself to her waist.

She yanked again, and it ripped higher, as high as her breast. She ripped again, and the dress was torn all the way up the side. Then, in a frenzy, she tore and cried, panting heavily as her hands and arms flailed at the thin material of the garment, ripping it, tearing it to shreds.

Donna stood in her panties, the rest of her lovely body bared. She looked down at the floor, at the remains of her dress. She looked at herself, wishing she could tear and rip her body as easily as she had the dress.

She slumped to the floor, her body shaking as she tried to release the tears and pentup emotion that was clamoring for escape.

CHAPTER TEN

DONNA noticed that Pop wasn't in the cashier's booth, then remembered that he usually ate about this time. The band hadn't come, but

the records blared their fretful, pulsating music. And downstairs, there had been a new attachment, a loudspeaker, set up in the hall, that carried the music from upstairs to the ear of anyone passing on the street, probably on the premise that a man passing by who liked torchy recordings, and heard one, would come upstairs and spend a little money. Anyway, it was there, and was loud, so loud that her eardrums had vibrated heavily as she had started up the stairs.

And it hadn't succeeded in its apparent purpose, either, for there were very few men in the hall, and these were merely drinking at the bar.

Donna went to the dressing room, entering as Miss Emily left.

"Well, stranger."

"Hello, Miss Emily. I *have* been away a couple of days, haven't I?"

"You sure have. Well, it's nice to see ya back."

"Thanks."

She pushed open the door, saw Peggy, alone, sitting at the dressing table, a pout on her face. She looked up, saw Donna, and her face smiled.

"Gee, honey, it's good to see ya." She rose to meet Donna.

"I kinda missed you, too, Peggy." It was good to be back, even though she hadn't thought that it would be. She had remembered only the obviously bad, crass things and aspects of the hall, had forgotten that some parts of it had been nice.

"How you been?" she asked the girl, and Peggy scowled.

"No good. No good at all."

"Did ja do anythin' about—you know?"

"No." She scowled again.

"What's new?"

"Nothin'. Wait a minute. Donna, look, you didn't do nothin' with a letter I had here a coupla days ago, did ya?"

"No. I don't know anythin' about it."

"Well, I had a letter here. From a guy, a nice guy. He all but asked me to marry him, ya know. He meant it, too. An' someone stole it."

"Stole it! You sure, Peg?"

"Yes."

"But—why would anyone want to steal a letter?"

"I don't know. There ain't no reason."

"It wouldn't mean anythin' to anyone else, would it?"

"No. That's just it. It was to me, an' about me. That's all. I ast everybody about it, but they all say they never seen it. Gee, Donna, I could cry, I *did* cry when I first found out. That damn letter meant so much to me, an' someone had to steal it. Why?"

"You sure you didn't mislay it somewhere?"

"Positive. I left it here when I went home one night. The same night Pop made ya stay after, remember?" Peggy averted her eyes when she said this. She didn't want to embarrass Donna, if what she expected had transpired.

Donna shrugged her shoulders, started to undress.

"It's got me beat. It just doesn't make sense."

"Don't I know it."

She noticed Peggy's eyes now, really, for the first time. She had thought the girl's actions were quicker than usual, but hadn't given it much thought. But now she noticed that her pupils were dilated, looking almost like pinheads. And her eyes were wide-open, staring.

Dope. Damn Tony an' all his gang. Ruinin' a gal like Peggy. Peggy was crying again, perky, horrible-sounding cries. There was an unreal quality to them.

"Ahhhww, Peg. Don't take it so hard. It's not that bad, honest."

"I swear, Donna, if I ever found out who took that letter, I'd kill 'em. I would!" she added with vehemence, as though to make sure that Donna wouldn't think she was merely saying it. But Donna, watching her, listening to her words that were under the spell of reefers, knew that Peggy, in this condition, was capable of doing anything she said she would.

"It's a shame, Peg. I'm *real* sorry, honest."

"So will someone else be, by Gosh, if I find out who it was." Peggy looked about wildly as the door opened and Ann came in.

"How are ya, honey? Well, by God, if it ain't our favorite missin' person. Hi ya, Honey."

"Hi, Annie. How's everything?"

"Good, honey, 'cept for Peg. She tell ya, honey?"

"Yeah."

"Damn shame. But, boy, just let her get ahold of whoever it was, honey. You just let her," Ann muttered as she went into the toilet, closing the door.

"How's Ruth?" Donna asked, not being able to think of anything else to say.

"Good. That guy ain't called for her to come to South America or wherever it was, with him, though, an' she's takin' it kinda hard. She was so sure he'd come."

"Poor kid."

"Yeah."

There was silence for a minute.

"How's Baby?" Donna asked, conscious of the awkwardness she felt when no one was talking.

"That witch."

"Why?" Donna was surprised at the way Peggy had spit out the words.

"Ohh, she raised hell in here last night, an' Pop fired her. Guess what she did?"

"I couldn't."

"Well, she tells Pop that she's been here a long time, an' she wants a bigger cut outa the tickets, or else she'll quit. So, he says quit, an' she says, I will, then she goes out on the floor, gets up on the bandstand, takes the microphone, an' starts callin' Pop a whole mess a lousy names over the thing. He finally got her back in here, an' then she blames it all on us, sayin' we gave her money to do it, that we put her up to it."

"Did ya?"

"No-o!" She looked at Donna disgustedly. "How can ya ask that? You *know* we wouldn't."

Donna shrugged, laughed.

"Better finish gettin' ready," she said, then started combing her hair.

Ann came back to the room.

"Where ya been, Donna? Or is it our business, Honey?"

"No, it ain't."

"Okay, honey." You could tell that the answer had hurt Ann, but so what? Could she tell them about the party, about her brother, about Martin, or anything about what had happened? No. She couldn't really tell them about Mr. Evans. No, she had nothing to tell them.

Just Fred. She'd tell Fred.

Then it occurred to her . . . that . . . she didn't know . . . wasn't sure at all . . . that Fred was a cop. Oh, sure, there was no doubt in her mind of it, but still, she wasn't positive. And it would be rather silly to walk right up to him an' say — "Fred, I know you're a cop, an' I have some information for ya." No, she'd have to be cautious. Maybe he had been telling the truth when he said he was just interested in Tony because he was her brother. Well, time would tell. Right now, the important thing to do was get ready, get out on the floor, where she would see Fred when he came, where he would see her . . . if he came.

Oh, Gosh, but he has to, he just has to come. I gotta tell someone, or else I'll go crazy. He's gotta come.

Fred came to the bench where she was sitting. Gosh, but his firm face and red hair looked good, even though it had just been a few days since she had last seen him. And the way she had acted toward him then, as if he were a criminal.

He stood in front of her, waiting for her to speak first, not sure just what her reaction would be. He was puzzled by the girl, puzzled by the swift way that her emotions could and did change.

She stood close to him.

"Dance?" She put every ounce of sweetness and love into the one word that she could muster. She didn't want him to be scared off. She had to talk to him, find out things, as well as tell him, tell him all that had happened.

They moved out onto the floor, and his arm enclosed her gratefully.

"Not mad at me?" he asked, a tentative quality in his voice.

"No. Gosh, no, honey." She hugged him, and he grinned broadly at her.

"I didn't know what to expect," he admitted, looking away from her eyes.

"I'm sorry, it's my fault."

They looked into each others eyes, saw the love there.

"Let's sit out for awhile," Fred suggested, and she agreed readily. Now would be her chance.

"What's new, Donna?" he asked after they were seated, and he had ordered Scotch highballs.

"A lot, Fred. There's. . . a lot I want to tell ya." She watched him closely. Why couldn't she just ask if he were a policeman?

"Go ahead. I'm listening."

"Well. . . remember how . . . well . . . you used to ask a lot of questions. . . about Tony?"

He nodded. "Oh Gosh, Donna, do we have to go through that again—"

"No," she said quickly, stopping him. "It's not that . . . not the same. . . I really have to know. . . I want you to tell me, Fred I have to know the reason."

"I've already told you, baby." Exasperation. "I do it 'cause he's your brother."

Donna didn't know what to say. This wasn't going the way she had wished it would.

"Look, Fred, let me try to explain . . . things . . . things have happened . . . since I saw you last . . . I suspect what your . . . work is . . . I've got to know for *sure*, d'ya understand? I *have* to. Tell me the *real* reason, Fred. It's not just . . . well, like you said, is it? Doesn't it have something to do with . . . some tie-up with . . . what Tony does? Aren't you, Aren't you. . ."

"What?" he asked, and a frown came on his face.

"Aren't you with the police? Please, Fred. I think you are. Tell me I'm right."

At the word "police" his eyes had flicked open quickly, and his mouth had twitched. Then he had seemed to relax all over, as though

—it seemed to Donna — he knew he wouldn't be wrong in trusting her.

"What's happened?" His voice had lost its usual casualness, and had taken on a businesslike quality.

"You. . . I'm right, aren't I?"

"Yes." He nodded curtly, shortly, and Donna felt a load lift from her white, petal-smooth shoulders.

"Well, Tony, my brother. . . this isn't easy for me, Fred. . ."

"I know. Go on. Take your time."

"Tony is mixed up with a dope gang. . . I . . . found out last night."

"Tell me what happened. . . everything. . . don't leave out a thing. Understand?"

She nodded. Yes, she'd have to tell him everything, right down to the very last detail. Even how she once had thought he was with the gang himself. All her feelings, her suspicions. The works. And he was waiting for her to start.

"I'll start at the beginning, Fred. I'll . . . I'll tell you everything I can remember."

"Good."

"When I first met you. . . " her voice went on recounting and explaining every detail of her experience.

Fred listened closely, his face a mask.

Some time later, when she had finished, he leaned back against his seat, his face still showing no feeling, no emotion.

"That's quite a story. You're clever, Donna. An' you've done the right thing in coming to me, too."

"I was sure I had, Fred. It's . . . It's such a relief to get that all out of my mind."

"I can imagine. Look, you won't be safe now, you know. Telling your brother was the worst thing you could have done."

"Ohhh, I don't think—"

"You don't think Tony would hurt you. Well, I've known punks like him for a long time, an' plenty of them. Believe me, Baby, any guy that would put his sister where he put you last night, any guy that would do that, would stop at nothing." He thought for a moment,

then, reaching a decision, got up, his hand warm on her shoulder.

"I'll go downstairs an' wait," he told her. "You'll be safe enough here. I'll just make sure no one comes up here after ya. When you're through, I'll take you down to headquarters, 'n we'll record your story."

"But can't we go now? I don't feel very much like staying here."

"I'd rather you did, honey," he told her gently. "It's . . . safe, an' there's a chance someone or other'll show up here. In that case, I can nab 'em. You understand?"

"Sure, Fred," she agreed reluctantly.

"That's a good kid. Don't worry now." He started for the door.

"I won't." *Thank Gosh for Fred*, Donna thought. *If it weren't for him. . . .*

"What d'ya want to see me for?" Peggy stood angrily, defiantly, in Pop's office, hating him for what he had done to her, hating him because she had no defense against the old man. Her hands were on her hips, and she glared, biting her lips. She felt cocky, and didn't give a damn for anything at this moment. She just wanted to get back to her reefer she had left when he had sent the boy to summon her.

Pop sat at his desk, his face grimy . . . nails dirty . . . shirt stained. He wiped a trace of drool from his chin, grinned slyly, evilly.

"Sit down." His tone retained a gentleness that was unlike him. Peggy wondered what was up.

"All right, so I sit down." She sat. "Now what?"

Pop chuckled.

"I thought it would be better for you to hear what I got to say sittin', 'cause the shock might prove too much for you—in your condition, ya know." He smiled at her.

Peggy couldn't answer. How had he found out about her trouble? Who had been cheap enough to tell him, when everyone here knew what would happen, what would be the obvious decision on his part?

"After all," he was saying, "I have a name to uphold in this community, an' I can't have it bandied about by tramps like you!"

"Shut up."

"My dear little girl, you're speakin' to your ex-boss, so—please let's have a bit of respect."

"Respect for stinkin' old age, that's all you'll get from me, ya dirty ol' man." She shouted at him, and was glad.

"Maybe if ya want to . . . entertain me tonight . . . I'd let ya stay another day or so. . . " he offered, and she spit at him.

Pop reached for her, his fingers contacting her softness before she pulled away. In her doped state, that had been the end, the crowning gesture, the grand finale, the straw that had broken the camel's back. Only, she was no camel.

She grabbed a small clock that was on Pop's desk, threw it against the wall, shattering it.

"Stop it," he ordered, but she paid little attention to him. Her mind was on the desk, and all the junk on it that she could break and smash.

Peggy continued her reign of destruction. Tickets, receipts, payroll notations hit the floor, or were torn to shreds by her quick fingers . . . A book . . . pencils . . . a pen . . . a magazine . . . pictures that he hadn't had the opportunity to hang on the wall . . . a stapler, which she threw at the old man . . . missed him . . . a letter . . . a letter. . .

Her letter!!!

Her glazed eyes stared hard at it, making sure. But there it was, as plain as day. It had been crumpled, and was wrinkled, and oily, but it was hers. She looked at it, then at the old man.

She held it up for the cowering old man to see.

"My letter." It was a statement, an accusation, a question at one and the same time.

The old man grinned weakly, but said nothing. The grin conveyed guilt as well as anything he would have said.

She reached down to the floor, picked up the paper weight, held it in her hand, ready to throw, looked at Pop.

The old man ducked, and the missile went sailing through the window, the glass shattering, falling with a tinkle as it hit the street.

Pop seized upon this moment to dash for the door, Peggy chasing immediately after him.

They ran into the dance hall, and Peggy began to scream as she chased him, her racing body tense against the thin dress. Pop dodged here and there, avoiding the girl's swinging fists, bumping into people, crying for protection. But to the watching audience of this spectacle, the whole affair was uproariously funny, and no one rushed to Pop's aid. The employees didn't like him enough to be of any service, and the others didn't know him. To them, he was just an old man being chased by a young girl with a very nice—hmmmm—body.

Miss Emily had heard the glass shatter, and was coming out of the dressing room to investigate when she saw Pop and Peggy surge out of the office. One look was enough for her. She knew Peggy, especially when she had been doped up, and she knew what Peggy thought of Pop, for that matter what they all thought of Pop. Miss Emily turned quickly back to the dressing room, even as the roars of the crowd were heard.

She lifted the phone that was in one corner.

She dialed a number.

"Hello operator. Get me the police, please."

When Fred had left Donna, he went out through the door to the hall and started down the stairs, cursing under his breath.

"Clever, that was certainly no word for her," he muttered to himself.

He reached the bottom of the stairs, eased his body into a dark corner. The music from the new loudspeaker blared directly above him with a near-deafening volume.

He reached inside his coat, removed his gun, a small revolver. He broke it open, spun the barrel.

He replaced the gun in his pocket where it would be easy to reach, lit a cigarette, and slouched against the wall.

"No sir," he thought again. "She isn't clever . . . it's just her brother who's dumb . . . imagine that cluck takin' her to the party . . . I could kill 'im. . . ."



"Stop it!" the old man ordered, but Peggy was violent. She continued her reign of destruction to the delight of all the men in the dancehall.

Fred flicked the cigarette angrily across the hall, watched the ember glow die to nothingness.

"Well, what now, Mr. Moto?" he asked himself, then laughed a short, bitter laugh.

"Guess she and her brother'll both have to go. One knows too much an' they *both* talk too much. Too bad about her, too . . . nice girl . . . sweet . . . too bad."

He took the gun from his pocket again, rechecked.

Well, he'd just wait for her to get through. He couldn't have had her go right away. He hadn't made up his mind just how he was going to get rid of her. So he'd had to give her that lame-brain excuse about wanting to try and trap someone tonight. An' she swallowed it, he thought wryly. He laughed. "Sure a lucky thing for me she thought I was a cop. Although what the hell did I ever do that made her think that?" He pondered for a moment, trying to recall, but he couldn't.

The door opened and two young fellows came in, giving him a short, furtive glance as they started up the stairs.

"Too bad about her . . . yes, it is . . . I think I even loved her . . . a little . . . but now . . . she'd hurt the racket if she hung around . . . I'll have to get Martin to get another runner, too. That Tony's no damn good at all."

Fred checked his watch.

"Plenty of time yet. I'm goin' to have a long wait. But it's gonna be worth it. But what the hell can I do with her?" He thought this over, rejecting various methods that had been used before.

A thin man with glasses passed him, going out, lighting a cigarette before he got outside in the wind.

Suddenly, he knew what he would do, how he would get rid of her. The parkways, out in Long Island, at this time of night, or rather, when he'd be taking her out there, would be desolate, deserted. Even the cops holed up at that hour, drinkin' coffee, shootin' the breeze with the boys.

"I'll tell 'er that . . . my precinct . . . that's it, my precinct is out there, that's why we have to go out there . . . then, when we get to a nice quiet place . . . I know a good spot . . . boom! the door opens,

the door closes . . . no more Donna . . . Too bad," he thought ruefully, regretting that he had to do it.

He felt the reassuring bulge of the revolver, the heaviness of it, and smiled.

Fred thought the blast of the music would drive him crazy by the time Donna was through upstairs. He swore at the loudspeaker, looked for a place to turn it off, but found none. "Must be controlled from upstairs."

He yelled viciously at the noise, but his words were lost in the song. The door was flung open.

It was Tony, and he was in a hurry.

But not in such a hurry that he didn't see Fred. His eyes flickered over the man, but he didn't break step in the slightest.

"Well," Fred thought, amused. "This might be interesting. Maybe young Tony'll take care of my troubles. He watched the boy's departing figure. Any kid that'd treat his sister like that would probably kill 'er too, if he thought he should." Fred grinned.

"Maybe I won't need ya after all, baby," he thought, patting his gun.

Tony reached the top of the stairs, paused to regain his breath.

So, that redhaired bum of a cop was down there! That meant only one thing, that Donna had squealed already. *He was hidin' in the corner, like I couldn't see him, for Gosh sake. Why didn't he do somethin' though? Why didn't he pinch me right then?* He couldn't think of an answer to that. He looked down the stairs at the gloomy figure of Fred. Fred's eyes were on him, and it made him jumpy.

What the hell's his game, anyway? He turned from the man's eyes, pushed open the door. *I'll find Donna an' see what the hell's goin' on.*

When he opened the door to the hall, the noise and confusion inside burst out upon him with a savage blast. Tony's eyes bugged in amazement as he took in what was going on. The whole hall was a madhouse of flying bodies, screams and oaths.

His eyes searched every nook and cranny of the hall, but he couldn't locate Donna. She was undoubtedly there, 'cause that cop was downstairs, but by the time he had surveyed one section of the noisy hall, and moved his eyes to another, the whole mass of people would shift, and he would find himself seeing the same faces at one end of the hall that he had seen at the other.

A girl screamed.

A siren sounded in the distance.

Tony's eyes widened with fear, and his hand went instinctively to his coat pocket, feeling for the automatic that was concealed there. He looked about quickly, crouched in panic, then inched toward the door as more sirens joined the lonely wail that he had first heard.

Tony ran toward the door.

"Damn Donna anyway." The witch had squealed on him, she had. And this was what Fred was waiting for downstairs. "Some *help*! He's chicken! Afraid to try to get me alone."

Tony laughed a bubbly laugh as he lunged for the door.

"I'll fix the bum!"

Fred lounged against the wall at an angle. He expected to see Tony come running out at any moment, a smoking gun still in his hand. He would have welcomed the sight. It would have saved him a lot of trouble.

Fred cursed, patted his gun again as if for assurance that it was still there. Maybe the record would be enjoyable if it were tuned down where a guy could listen to it peacefully.

Only it was too damn loud. Come on, for Gosh sake, what the hell's goin' on up there?

He glanced at his watch, saw that he still had a time to wait before Donna would be through, unless Tony speeded up the process.

Then he heard a siren.

He couldn't believe it. Was he hearing things? But no, he heard it again. That damn Donna. So she'd called the cops after all, even after she told him. Maybe she was wise to him, he thought, and panicked. So that was it. It was a trap, and that dumb blonde had fooled him after all.

He reached in his pocket for his gun, started for the door. But even as he reached it, he saw three cruisers pulling up outside, their sirens stopping with the low-throated growl that accompanies the end of their wails. The doors opened, and cops poured out.

"God, there's a million cops."

They rushed to the door, and Fred bolted for the stairs, drawing his gun as he ran. The police were right at his heels.

Well, they weren't going to get *him*.

"Stop you! Halt!"

Fred ran up the stairs.

At the same moment, Tony burst out of the hall, gun in hand. He looked down fearfully at the sight that greeted him. Fred, the damned cop, running up the stairs, with a dozen cops right after. Fred, the cop, the chicken-livered cop, bringing the whole damn precinct with him to capture one guy.

Tony laughed aloud, leveled his gun at the charging red-haired man who was almost on top of him.

"Die, copper."

Tony fired three quick shots into the huge body, saw the surprise — on the man's face, then the agony that replaced it. Fred emitted a horrible gasp, then crumpled at Tony's feet. Tony laughed as he looked down at him, then remembered the others.

I'll surrender, he thought, and looked toward them, starting to raise his hands.

But he realized in a split second that it was too late, and knew that he would die.

He was looking at the leveled muzzles of seven guns, and it seemed like forever that he waited for them to flash orange-red, and to roar the roar that he would never hear.

The gun flashed.

Tony felt a horrible punch in his stomach, knew that not a gun had missed. It was like a million Joe Louis' hitting ya with all they had. Only *two* million Louis' could never hit like this. Then Tony began to laugh.

Because, he had heard the roar of the guns after all. He'd heard it, and that was the funniest thing that he had ever had happened to him. He heard the guns . . . heard them . . . he giggled, tasted the blood that surged into his mouth. He began to say something.

"Fun . . ." but that was as far as he got. He couldn't say anymore. He was dead.

When Donna, her dress torn, being pushed and shoved, mauled and scratched in the melee, first heard the gunfire above the din of the hall, she didn't know what to make of it, but, without thinking why, she headed for the door as fast as she could against the crowd. It wasn't hard, making headway, for the shots had sobered most of the rioters.

She finally reached the door, pushing it open fearfully. She had an intuitive hunch that she wasn't going to enjoy what she saw.

The first thing that met her eyes was her brother, Tony, lying in a pool of blood on the landing. His face, twisted up at her, bore a frozen grimace, leered lifelessly at her. His body was turned in a grotesque position, abnormal in its corkscrewiness.

One of the cops pushed her aside, went into the hall, followed by several others. Three stayed outside, guarding the dead men. Donna knelt beside her brother, gazing with horror and misgiving at his lifeless eyes. Her stomach revolved and she wanted to be sick.

She saw another man lying down a few steps, recognized the suit as Fred's.

"Oh no." She looked from one to the other, and, as she glanced at Fred, one of the cops reached a foot under Fred's body, kicked it over so that the face was visible, the face made ugly by sudden, violent death. The cop gave the corpse another kick, gazed with unveiled disgust and hatred at the body.

"'Bout time we got this guy," he said, turning to the other policemen.

"Yeah," was the come-back. "This'll break up that damn dope ring at last. They won't be able to do much without the brains."

"No . . . especially if they all come as stupid as the other joe. I don't see him shootin' *this* guy though."

Donna listened, was stunned. What was it they were saying? Didn't they know Fred was a detective?

"He probly din' know who he was," the first cop was told. "These punks never see the big boys." The cops were looking at Donna now, kneeling beside Tony's body, looking at Fred, and gasping as she heard them talk.

Fred . . . the boss . . . somehow it didn't make sense . . . was too much for her to think about now . . . too much for her shocked mind to grasp . . . her mind, her brain, was all topsy-turvy . . . boss . . . dead . . . Tony . . . no . . . no . . . no . . . no . . . ending so . . . ugly . . . cops . . . damn them. . . .

She couldn't think. It was no use. Her brain felt cold, heavy, useless. She realized that, once the shock had worn off, she would be able to reason this all out, be able to put the pieces together.

Donna stood up, her torn dress leaving very little to the imagination. Her shoulders slumped, and her eyes, that once had sparkled and gleamed, were dull, lifeless, almost as lifeless as two other pairs of eyes that looked up at her.

The pool of blood by Tony's body attracted her, and her dazed mind accepted it as a symbol. She bent down, wiped the blood on her fingers, then looked at it.

She drew her fingers slowly across her breast, leaving five thin lines of red.

Then she laughed, inhaling laughter, hysterical laughter.

The cop stepped in front of her, slapped her hard with the palm of his hand.

She stopped laughing and slumped to the floor, crying.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE seasons of the year make little impression on the dancehalls of the city.

They don't vary the routine in a very large respect.

In the spring, there are love songs played, but although the air outside the hall might be fresh and clean, and smell of good things, the air inside is stuffy, smoky, and smells of beer.

In the summer, more love songs are played, and when it is hot, it is miserable inside the hall. But, for some reason, this very mugginess attracts a large number of customers.

In the fall, some places smell of burning leaves, the most wonderful of all odors, some places echo to the frenzied shouts from playing fields, or taste of cider, but the dancehall is the same. Love songs, beer smell, men trying to find their own importance in soggy beer mugs or bought women. It's a harmless pastime, but a fruitless search. It's not quite so hot in the halls in fall. Not quite.

The winter brings the only noticeable change to the dancehalls. Occasionally, the halls echo a Christmas carol for the dancers to wiggle to. It's not much, but it serves to tell the men, perpetually drunk on female flesh, that the Yuletide approaches.

But, other than that, things are pretty much the same. The halls still smell of beer and smoke, the same propositions are made, the same answers given. And in every crowd of hostesses, there is a Ruth, and an Anne, and a Baby, and a Peggy. They have different names, they smell differently, and they look different, but they are the same.

In one dancehall in the city, the cold of the winter night seeps through cracks in the building and penetrates the air inside. Occa-

sionally, a draft will enter with enough intensity to take a cloud of stale smoke and skud it a few feet before losing its power. The coldness makes a visible impression on the people there. They dance even closer, their bodies even more tightly glued together . . . if possible.

And you hear the men asking the girls the same questions. Then the girls giggle.

An old man is in the cashier's booth, sitting wearily, watching the proceedings. When a man comes up for tickets, he comes to life, but when he isn't busy, he simply stares without interest. His old mouth hangs open, and occasionally he gets enough strength to wipe away the drool that dribbles over his lip and down his chin. But he doesn't always catch it.

The floor is crowded. The warmth of a female body is welcome on this cold night.

The band plays a Christmas carol . . .

"*O come all Ye Faithful . . .*" and someone giggles, snickering an implication.

The tables are filled, and the bartender is rushed, having a tough time keeping up with the orders. Business is great.

The girls are pretty, too. Unusually so, for in most halls the work and complications thereof have long ago robbed the girls of any trace of girlish bloom. So it's nice to find a hall like this, where they are willing, where you can look 'em in the face and not get the feeling that maybe you should have stayed home with the little woman after all.

There's one babe in this hall who's busy all the time. She's got a body that would stir any man's imagination.

Her hair is kind of a blonde, and the men hope that she'll live up to the implication of its color.

The word is that she will, but then, how can you tell without seeing for yourself.

You can't trust the boys at the office. They'd say they made good with anybody they went out with, just to keep their reputation good.

No, you couldn't trust them.

But, boy, this gal looked the part. Cute, she was, but there was



The pool of blood by Tony's body attracted Donna, and her dazed mind accepted it as a symbol. She bent down, her lifeless eyes staring at the corpse.

a hard look on her face, a hard look that scared away the less adventurous. Her eyes were bottomless caverns, with a tragic quality to them. Oh, not all the time. Usually she'd look at you as if she wondered where you got the guts to call yourself a man, the kind of look that would embarrass you. But when she was off her guard, then you saw the tragedy in her eyes. No one knew what had happened, she never spoke about it, but it was there. You could conceive that it troubled her a lot, when she was alone, and you could feel sorry for her.

A man was dancing with the girl now. They *called* it dancing. Their bodies were pressed tightly against each other, and the girl was revolving her anatomy.

The man was grinning in a foolish way, as most men do at such a time. Then he whispered in her ear, and she looked him over carefully. Her lips moved, and the man reached into his pocket, extracted a bill, handed it to the girl, who lifted her dress and put it in her stocking.

Then she grabbed the top of her dress, pulled it down farther, exposing to the man's eyes a vision of perfection, firm and desirable.

The record changed, and a torchy blues number formed the musical background for this dance of passion.



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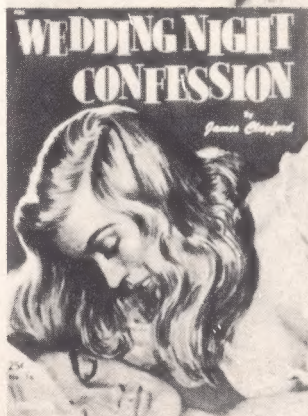
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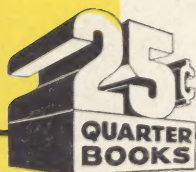




INNOCENCE . . .

Donna, a would-be showgirl . . . Tony, her mysterious brother . . . Fred, red haired, virile, demanding. These are the central characters in **CONFESSIONS OF A DIME-A-DANCE QUEEN**. A tale of outward love and underlying intrigue, placed amid the half-world of the dance halls. Donna's love for Tony and her passion for Fred became the leaven that started the forces moving and to come inexorably to a sudden and shocking conclusion.

(Specially posed by professional model)



THE BEST IN EXOTIC FICTION